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ABSTRACT

This project/dissertation addresses the problem of the lack of balance between the informational and formational reading of Scripture. Many Christians read God's Word for information's sake in order to gain knowledge in support of their specific agenda, while failing to have a desire to be formed by the Word.

Within the context of the life of the local church, the purpose of this project/dissertation is to enable pastors and lay persons to discover the formational approach to God's Word. Five key questions were addressed: 1) What is informational reading? 2) What is formational reading? 3) What principles are necessary to transform an individual or a group that reads the Scriptures for information into one that listens to the voice of God as they encounter the text? 4) How can persons overcome preconditions that cause them to master the text and become open to the Word that it might shape their lives? 5) What spiritual disciplines are necessary in maintaining a formational approach to Scripture?

The research for this study covered the key components of information and formation, reading theory, the role of the Bible, and some early formational approaches to the Scriptures.

Chapter 1 presents the nature and scope of the project/dissertation. It also describes the focus of the study. Chapter 2 defines information and formation, and also considers the effects of reading theory as it relates to information and formation. Chapter 3 offers further research related to the role

of the Bible, Jesus' use of the Old Testament, and some early formational approaches. Chapter 4 is a detailed description of the project. Chapter 5 offers the results of the key questions spelled out in Chapter 1. Chapter 6 is a review.

This study is significant because it addresses the lack of balance between informational and formational approaches to Scripture. This study helps by offering a means of overcoming this imbalance through the transforming power of God as we learn to listen to and feed on God's Word.

The mode of formational reading allows us to become open to God. When we are open to God's voice the possibility of becoming conformed to the image of Christ becomes very real.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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A FORMATIONAL APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE

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the Faculty of
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CHAPTER 1

Background

As a pastor serving in the same church for ten years, I became interested in the idea of a formational approach to Scripture for two reasons. First, although Scripture was very important to me in my work and ministry, it seemed that my approach had become rather routine. Very little time was being spent in the Word for the purpose of allowing God to feed me and give me much needed guidance. Most of my time was spent studying the Word in preparation for the next sermon or an upcoming Bible study. Thus, my approach was becoming very dry and it seemed that the quest for material or information to meet my agenda was my sole purpose for reading God's Word.

I did not totally understand my situation until entering the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary in the Winter of 1986. There, while browsing through the bookstore, I found a book called Shaped By The Word by Robert Mulholland, Jr. As the pages unfolded before me, I realized that I was not allowing God to shape my life at all due to my informational approach to Scripture. I was merely seeking information in order to fulfill another obligation in the church.

The second reason for becoming interested in this subject was that, if this was happening to me, it was very likely that others in the church were approaching the Word in much the same way. At first, in an informal way, I began to talk with others in the church about this subject. I soon realized that

I was not alone. Others were experiencing some of the same difficulties in their approach to the Word. As a result, my interest became intensified.

Because of my increased interest, I began to read more on the subject of formationally approaching the Word. Mulholland suggests that "we have a deeply ingrained way to reading in which we are the masters of the material we read."¹ Most of us who read the Word regularly do so with specific goals in mind, often to the exclusion of what God might be attempting to say. Our desire is simply to answer a specific question or find a passage that supports our personal agenda. Because our general mode of reading is to treat the material as something to be grasped and controlled for our purposes, it is possible, that for the most part, the Word is treated no differently.

The real problem now seemed to be surfacing. It was not that persons in the congregation were not reading their Bibles. Nor was it an issue that I was failing to read the Word. The real problem was our approach to Scripture. The Word was being treated as though it was something to be used, for the most part, to back our specific claims or support our particular agenda.

Later it would be revealed that 68% of the congregation did not have a consistent daily time alone in the Word, but even this problem would, in large part, prove to be related to their approach. This issue will be much more fully explained in Chapter 4.

¹ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., Shaped By The Word (Nashville: The Upper Room, 85), 21.

Context of the Study

The Winfield United Methodist Church of Winfield, West Virginia, offers the context in which this study has taken place. At the time in which this study was done, Winfield was a small "county seat" town of approximately 700.

The Winfield United Methodist Church consisted of 186 members from all walks of life. Occupations ranged from school teachers, factory workers, engineers, and small business owners.

Educationally, the adult members of the church by in large had completed college with a bachelors degree.

The median age of the congregation was 45. Those participating in the study represented a much broader segment of the congregation ranging in ages from 25 to 75.

The Nature and Scope of the Project/Dissertation

The purpose of this project was, first, to utilize a study group format to train a self-selected group of members from the church to use a "formative reading" approach to Scripture meditation in private and corporate devotions in order to deepen relationship with God. Second, the participants were taught the differences between an informational approach, that is, reading to gain knowledge or control of a text for a particular purpose, and a formational approach to Scripture that allows persons to listen to and be shaped by God. Third, the group learned the inner posture of being required for a formative

approach to Scripture. Finally, the group was exposed to and given opportunities to practice various exercises in formative reading to experience this vital approach to the Word. It was, therefore, the goal of this project to utilize a formative approach to Scripture in order to bring the participants into a relationship with God that would allow them to respond to God with openness and a willingness to become conformed to the image of Christ.

The Problem to Be Considered

The Scriptures are key in every aspect of the Christian life including our relationship with God, our neighbor, and the way we live our daily lives. Without the Word our lives would be far less what God calls us to be. The Word, when received by prayerfully attentive and willingly responsive hearts, shapes the way we think, act, and feel about all of life. Being immersed in God's Word, that is, opening ourselves totally to God, is also essential for maturation and growth in grace. This maturity and growth comes as our relationship with God deepens, and it is measured by the quality of the life we live in the world. Ones who are maturing and growing in grace place God first in decision making. They are open to serving God in areas of life previously not considered, and life with God becomes as natural as breathing. As Jesus said, "you will know them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:20). For these reasons Christians need a daily time of listening to God's voice in the Word. By this statement I do not mean so much the knowledge gained by reading the Bible,

but the opening of ourselves to the voice of God in the Word by which we are formed toward the image of Christ.

We live in an "Information" age. Information has become power. This means that much of our reading has one specific goal in mind: mastering and using the accumulated information to implement our agenda in the world. Because so many have become preconditioned to read this way, my theory is that many Christians are reading God's Word for information's sake (reading primarily to gain knowledge that can be controlled or used to support one's specific agenda) as opposed to having a desire to be formed by it (hearing the voice of God in the text for the sake of being conformed to the image of Christ).

The Focus of the Study

The focus of this study was to discover what facilitates a shift from an "informational" to a "formational" mode of reading the Bible. With this statement in mind, five key questions were addressed in this project/dissertation: 1) What is informational reading? 2) What is formational reading? 3) What principles are necessary to transform an individual or a group that reads the Scriptures for information into one that listens to the voice of God as they encounter the text? 4) How can persons overcome preconditions that cause them to master or control the text and become open to the Word that it might shape their lives? 5) What spiritual disciplines are necessary in maintaining a formational approach to Scripture?

Chapter 2 considered the nature of the formative approach to Scripture. This chapter addressed questions one and two in order to determine the distinct differences between formational and informational reading. It also addressed the principles sought in questions three, four, and five for the purpose of offering a means of transformation for persons who seek to allow the Word to shape their lives.

The third chapter examined the role of the Bible as it relates to the formative approach from both the historical and contemporary view.

The fourth chapter demonstrated how the project was developed and carried out. This chapter explained the project from its conception to its completion.

In chapter 5, the results and findings of questions three through five were given.

The final chapter was an evaluation of the project. And, included in this chapter were suggestions for possible alternatives for any future project of this nature.

CHAPTER 2

A Formative Approach

This chapter will define "informational reading" and "formational reading." It will also examine the impact of reading theory upon both the informational and formational approaches to Scripture. Most importantly, I will build a case in favor of the formational approach to Scripture. Although it is not my intention to dismiss the importance of information, I am convinced that the very clear distinctions of the formational approach are necessary if the Bible is to be an agent of God's grace in spiritual formation.

One of the primary reasons for reading, in any field, is that of gaining information. We learn to read both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly we learn to read by the use of theories, models of reading, and empirical studies that support them. Implicitly we learn to read as a teacher adopts a particular theory and places it into practice. Here there is interaction, and the attitude and instructional behavior of the teacher has a very definite impact upon the attitudes of the students.² From the earliest stages of reading development we learn that the value of reading lies in its use as a tool for communicating, understanding, and enjoying.³

² Jo Anne L. Vacca, Richard T. Vacca, Mary K. Gove, Reading and Learning to d (Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1987), 4.

³ Vacca, Vacca, Gove, 10.

We live in an age of information. There has never been a time in history when so much information has been so readily available. As a result the seeking of information has become significant in every field of endeavor because it creates a certain amount of power and control for the one holding the information. The one holding it often has the ability to obtain desired results.

Much of the way we read is informational. We are the masters of the material we read. Whether we realize it or not, most of us approach reading with our own agenda firmly fixed. If what we read does not meet with our agenda it is put away and something else quickly takes its place.⁴ Mulholland sums it up this way; "Our general mode of reading is to perceive the text as an object 'out there' over which we have control. We control our approach to the text; we control our interaction with the text; we control the impact of the text upon our lives."⁵

Reading Theory

Much of this is due to the way we are taught to read. Two conceptual frameworks are found in reading instruction. The first is called the "Bottom-Up" conceptual framework. Teachers who operate in this mode believe students must decode letters and words before they are able to derive meaning from sentences, paragraphs, and larger selections. Reading acquisition requires

⁴ Mulholland, 21.

⁵ Mulholland, 21-22.

mastering and integrating a series of word identification skills. Accuracy in word recognition is essential for comprehending the passage.⁶

A second approach is called the "Top-Down" conceptual framework. Teachers who take this approach consider reading for meaning an essential component of all reading instruction. They believe all reading instruction should involve meaningful activities involving reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Here, the emphasis is not so much dependent upon the correctness of word recognition, but rather, the student is taught to use the context or meaning of the passage to determine unrecognized words.⁷

Both of these approaches involve the seeking of information. Both approaches involve the mastering of the skill of reading, and the understanding of what is being read. The point here is that from the very beginning of our reading instruction we are taught the importance of seeking and mastering information. This does not mean that reading instruction alone causes persons to approach everything they read strictly in an informational mode. But, the way we are taught to read does develop certain patterns that may hold throughout life. The "skill" of reading is a complex integrative process involving cognitive, attitudinal, and manipulative responses.⁸ These patterns coupled with the various rules a society lives by and the basic beliefs and

Vacca, Vacca, Gove, 20.

Vacca, Vacca, Gove, 21.

Vacca, Vacca, Gove, 36.

attitudes of those around us shapes our attitudes, perceptions, and habits from the earliest days of instruction. This in no way suggests that seeking information is wrong. Information is quite necessary. Nor does this suggest that our way of perceiving things is wrong. The problem lies in the fact that we are all bound, in one degree or another, to perceptions or philosophies that underwrite human behavior.⁹ In other words, we approach what we read with preconceived ideas that have a very definite impact upon the way we view what is being read.

In addition to the above mentioned theories of learning how to read, the scope of reading theory is quite extensive. The very nature of text becomes a significant factor in reading theory. While one may generally define text as a more or less unified stretch of written material which has a beginning and an ending, "text," when interpreted by extra-linguistic signs, may become extended metaphorically to include messages generated by such sign-systems as traffic signals, religious rituals, or non-verbal body-language. As for biblical writing another issue comes into focus. What constitutes a text? Is it the whole Bible, whole books of the Bible, or is it possible to view a single verse as text? While this latter may be possible, single verses or short passages are

⁹ Charles Allyn, Sociology An Introduction (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972),

usually heavily dependent upon context (that which precedes and follows the passage). Without context possibilities of meaning are extremely limited.¹⁰

Differences between theories of the nature of texts and textuality often carry fundamentally different ideas or notions of what it is for a text to convey meaning. Some theories of textuality link the text's author and context of situation inseparably with its meaning. Other theories view meaning as having a wide range of possibilities that can be generated by the sign-system of the text and its relation to other texts. Still other theories determine meaning from the relationship between a text and successive readers or reading communities, or by both.¹¹

Until recently texts have been defined as stretches of language which serve to express the thoughts and ideas of their authors and the states of affairs in the extra-linguistic world.¹² This definition, when used in biblical interpretation, is referred to as the classical-humanist paradigm. However, in the last several years there has been a transformation regarding the question of text. Derrida sums up this transformation in the following words: "A text is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces, referring endlessly to

³ Anthony Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan shing House, 1992), 55.

¹ Thiselton, 55.

² Thiselton, 55-56.

something other than itself, to other differential traces."¹³ Barthes adds to this by saying: "a text is not so much a "given" as an invitation to activity."¹⁴

With this invitation I would like to examine four significant reading theories for the purpose of seeing how they work and impact formational reading in both the positive and negative sense. The theories selected for this portion of study are Semiotics, Deconstruction, Literary Theory, and Reader-Response. Each theory has its own unique characteristics. These will be highlighted, and examples of how each theory is used will be offered.

Semiotics

Semiotics has been called the theory of signs. Semiotics is distinctive in that it is concerned with the nature and status of codes. It is through these codes that texts communicate meaning. "Code is the sign-system, lattice, or network of which the linguistic choices which convey the message are expressed."¹⁵ An example of this can be found in music. The musical code enables a musician to produce a particular note. The musical code for time is not the note itself. The code for the key in which the note is to be played is not the note. But when all the various codes are taken into consideration a particular note can be played. Semiotics is also concerned with those forms of non-verbal social behavior which, through the presupposition of a code, become

³ Thiselton, 57.

⁴ Thiselton, 57.

⁵ Thiselton, 80.

signifying messages. An example here is that a group of flowers in their natural habitat may not convey any particular message or thought beyond their individual beauty. However, those same flowers woven into a wreath and sent to a funeral become a sign of sympathy.¹⁶

A word of caution is derived from all of this, namely, to make a mistake about the semiotic code violates the text and distorts its meaning. In the apocalypse of John, for example, several layers of codes exist. References to earlier texts such as Ezekiel or Daniel are not simple reminders of earlier traditions. In some cases they perform a semiotic function, providing another level of encoding which will impact how a message is to be read. Another example is the one hundred forty four thousand. This reference presupposes a code that is different from mathematics. The code of mathematics may exclude any number greater or less than John was referring to. John was dealing with contrastive networks which signal differences between completeness and incompleteness in regard to the tradition concerning "twelve" which would have represented a convention among certain communities.¹⁷

The Swiss linguist Saussure was one of the founders of semiotics as a modern discipline. He insisted on three fundamental principles. The first was what he called "the arbitrary nature of a sign," and was considered a key principle. The arbitrary nature of a sign constitutes an axiom which "dominates

¹⁶ Thiselton, 80-81.

¹⁷ Thiselton, 81.

all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numerous."¹⁸ It is arbitrary, for example, that the English split up the color-spectrum semiotically in such a way that it has one word for "blue," while Russians have to decide if it is "light blue" or "dark blue." Such grammatical categories as substantive verbs or adjectives represent abstract distinctions of habit, convention, and convenience.¹⁹ Second, he believed that language functions as "a system of interdependent terms."²⁰ Meaning is derived by relationships of difference within the system. For example, in a sub-system of color-words, "orange" is not determined by pointing to oranges on a tree. Rather, "orange" derives its meaning from the neighboring colors in the continuum of "red" and "yellow." Third, he distinguished between concrete acts of speech (*parole*) and the language-system (*langue*) which represents a purely formal or abstract structure; a network of possibilities out of which concrete utterances could be generated.²¹ In other words, the reader will not explore all the alternative possibilities from which he or she may choose each time an utterance occurs. The lattice or structure of differing yet inter-related terms do not represent concrete actuality. These terms are abstract potentiality until the speaker actualizes a particular choice in a concrete use of a specific portion of language.

³ Thiselton, 84.

⁹ Thiselton, 85.

⁰ Thiselton, 83.

¹ Thiselton, 83.

An example of this can be offered in the form of a question: "What is Greenhouse?" Without the concrete use of a specific portion of language "Greenhouse" could mean a number of things. It could refer to a building where plants are raised, a house painted green, or even the residence of the Green family.

The codes with which semiotics is concerned offer a very positive element to information. If one were not to read the signs along a highway, no matter how much information one might have concerning a destination, it would be very difficult to get to the destination. Information thrives on codes that, when placed in the right context, add significantly to the understanding of the text.

Semiotics further enhances information because it functions as a system of interdependent terms. Information (the knowledge grasped by certain given facts or circumstances) is dependent upon the relationship between terms. As the terms mesh together in a given context, information can be derived concerning the subject at hand.

Much of this holds also true for the formational reading of Scripture. The codes when properly read can open persons to seek the voice of God. Meaning may be perceived as the codes are unfolded. But, while the recognition and understanding of codes is valuable, it is equally possible, without the guidance of God's Spirit, to become bogged down with the codes themselves. So much emphasis could be placed upon determining what the codes are that one might

miss the whole point. Formation is dependent upon our openness to God who is able to utilize codes to show us the way.

Deconstruction

The theory of Deconstruction assumes texts have no permanent or final meaning. In Deconstruction texts take on the form of ever shifting textures. "Their shape and function undergo constant transposition as new intertextual contexts and reading-contexts re-define their meaning-matrices and their effects."²² In other words the meaning of a particular text today will no longer be its meaning tomorrow because of a constant shifting of its context and the context of the reader. Texts become processes which move us on, but never end. "Any 'final' meaning is called into question by the never ending network of intertextuality which surrounds all texts and places them within new signifying systems."²³ Conscious judgements are engulfed in an endless sea of signifying systems (arrangement of signs).

This theory reaches its apex in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida proposed that a text does not have a signature or a referential realm outside its frame,

it is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some context enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network. (differing lines of thought that cross in continually changing paths), a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces

Thiselton, 15.

Thiselton, 51.

(the differing arrangement of signs and marks that define meaning).²⁴

Derrida's best known work is *Grammatology*. *Grammatology* is the "theory of writing" or "the science of writing."²⁵ Derrida believes in the priority of writing over speech. By this he declares that the term "writing" conveys all communicative systems which are other than vocal.

The soil in which deconstruction grows is in the belief that language, which serves to articulate human concepts, merely reflects prior language and concepts from which it came. The perspective is that we get stuck in our own paths, because language takes us where we have already been. Deconstructionists believe that when we recognize this cycle we are in we may be able to see an opening out of it. "Texts provide space for an indeterminate 'whither', and seem to hold a promise to take us forward, where conceptual of context-related language would merely throw us back onto paths already laid out."²⁶

To demonstrate further the nature of deconstruction, while in biblical traditions there is generally an interweaving of language and practice, of word, witness, and life, which achieves its culmination in the embodiment of the Word made flesh²⁷ (John 1:14), in Deconstruction there is a refusal to identify

Thiselton, 104.

Thiselton, 104.

Thiselton, 107.

Thiselton, 114.

the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning.²⁸

As far as information and formation goes there is a positive aspect in deconstruction. Informationally it opens one to greater possibilities of discovering new insights in old texts. Often the information we derive from standard approaches seems cut and dried. Deconstruction may open some doors to new thoughts. The same is true for formation. Crossan questioned the complacent assumption that we can somehow "finish" reading a biblical text. The deconstructionist side of formation reminds me that I am not the same person today as I was a year ago. Thus, the same passage can offer something new because the context of my life is new. The formational approach always seeks openness to the voice of God who is capable of constantly shaping us as we listen and seek the message for our lives.

However, in my best judgement there is a greater negative aspect of deconstruction. If meaning is continually changing, this can only serve to frustrate the seeking of information as well as formation. Further, with regard to information, deconstruction seems to abandon the rules that govern language as we understand it. Without some sense of clarity, purpose, and direction, information will at best become muddled. As for formation, beyond the earlier stated possibility of openness I see no particular reason for this theory to enhance the way God shapes us, if for no other reason than the fact that, unlike deconstruction, God never changes. God is the final word on

Thiselton, 115.

meaning. Deconstruction breaks down at the point of recognizing inspiration and the fact that God is in the text.

Literary Theory

Literary theory may be best described as a "socio-critical model of hermeneutical theory."²⁹ In this model a text which appears to have a neutral objective or innocent status is unmasked in the process of interpretation as supporting interests in maintaining given power-structures and power-relations within a society, culture, or religion.³⁰

Literary theory brings to biblical studies a complicated network of assumptions and methods which were not originally designed to take into account the particular nature of the biblical texts. This approach carries its own agenda of deeply philosophical questions concerning the status of language, the world, and theories of knowledge. In many cases this approach presupposes, or is connected with, a socio-political agenda which may be explicit or implicit.³¹

To give some examples of how literary theory works, take into account the authority of the author. In literary theory the notion that the author is a "canonical," "elitist," or "privileged" source of knowledge may be decentralized by spreading authorship and the creation of meaning across a wider reading-

Thiselton, 93.

Thiselton, 93.

Thiselton, 471.

community. In other words, the readers assume the role of author as though they had written the words themselves. This is done for the purpose of deriving meaning. Another example comes out of Peterson's work on Philemon. He says the Pauline texts project forward a "world" that is both a literary narrative-world of temporal sequence and also a sociological "world" of meanings. These are generated by perceptions of social relationships and social systems. It is out of these constructs that society may categorize their experience, so that they may give it order and form.³² What is at issue here is the relationship between the text and the context.

With this background in mind, let us consider some of the productive aspects of literary theory as they relate to biblical interpretation. Two literary devices will be examined, namely, ambiguity and irony. Both demonstrate considerable insight into the thinking of the exponents of literary theory. Stephen Prickett, for example, attacks both the translators of the Bible Society's Good News Bible and Kenneth Greystan's explanation of the principles behind the New English Bible for attempting to remove all ambiguities and sources of puzzlement in order to gain clarity and precision. Prickett argues that the biblical texts are not "clear, simple, and unambiguous, and to offer an unambiguous translation imposes a modern cultural norm onto the ancient text."³³

Thiselton, 57.

Thiselton, 476.

Literary theory does offer some productive contributions to biblical interpretation, such as the role of ambiguity in the biblical texts. "Ambiguities are set up by differing forces within the textual system; what superficially may appear as cognitive statement may on the basis of a 'close reading' turn out to be paradox, metaphor, irony, or some other form of non-transparent discourse."³⁴ Prickett illustrates the rôle of ambiguity in his work on the Elijah narratives. When Elijah fled to Horeb, Prickett says,

it is counter-productive to try to specify what the wind, the earthquake, and the "still small voice" mean; the key point is not the description of states of affairs but that Elijah came expecting one thing, and found another. God will not repeat the pyrotechnic display of Carmel. Elijah is re-commissioned in a persistent context of ambiguous discontinuity.³⁵

The recognition of ambiguity lends itself positively to both the informational and formational approaches. Informationally it may free an individual to search more diligently for additional leads. In other words, not everything is clear and simple. Ambiguity alerts persons to the possibility that there may be more than what is seen. Formationally, the recognition of ambiguity may produce a greater dependence upon God. If one is convinced that not everything is clear and simple, which our perceptual frameworks sometimes tend to make us believe, openness to God becomes a real possibility.

Thiselton, 476.

Thiselton, 476.

Another significant contribution relates to the shape of narrative with an incisive study of the role of irony as a literary device. Good argues that, "given the 'sophisticated subtlety' of irony, Old Testament writers may perhaps have said something different from, or more complex than, what we had supposed."³⁶ Irony may be defined as the conveyance of meaning (generally satirical) by words whose literal meaning is the opposite.

The story of Jonah offers an outstanding example of irony and satire. Jonah testifies to the sailors that he believes in the God who made the sea (1:9), yet he seeks to escape from the very same God by taking a ship to Tarshish (1:2). On at least two occasions Jonah prays to die, but becomes upset when this becomes a genuine possibility (4:3,9). Then the climactic irony concerns the episode of the great castor-oil plant. God had appointed it to grow and shade Jonah, but then appointed a worm to destroy it. Here the pretense and the irony are exposed. Jonah was angry enough to die over the plant that he had never worked with or caused to grow, but what about Ninevah? Good observes: "For the first time Jonah has committed himself to something. His verbal commitments to God earlier in the story were, as we have seen, a mere spouting of rote phrases with no real relation to Jonah's real feelings. Now Jonah is willing to die for a castor-oil plant. Could any satirist have drawn his portrait more deftly?"³⁷ The recognition of irony gives a

Thiselton, 477.

Thiselton, 478.

whole new informational structure to the passage. One now must consider the contrasts between what is said and what is done. Doing this opens the door to further information. At the same time new formational horizons are possible. Irony may challenge persons to ask what God is truly saying as a result of the contrasts that exist.

Literary theory does expose us to new possibilities from both the informational and formational approach. Informationally, the knowledge of ambiguities or irony will help one to focus upon the kinds of points that will help clarify the types of information one needs. Formationally, as stated earlier, ambiguity may create openness to God, irony may serve to allow us the possibility to see that things are not always as they appear, thus, turning us back to God's voice for direction.

Literary theory emphasizes the decentralization of the authority of the authors and their intentions. It also considers that the innocent may not be so innocent and must, therefore, be unmasked. Strong emphasis is given to power-structures and the socio-political agenda. As a result of all of this, I am convinced that the formational approach to Scripture would gain little from this theory. Much of what literary theory proposes is exactly what, in formational usage, we want to get away from. For example, the socio-political agenda may deter us from ever hearing the clear voice of God because it carries too much baggage. Even from the informational point of view this theory may only muddy the waters with such heavy emphasis upon deeply philosophical

questions. Therefore, although I am certain that literary theory does offer positive contribution to information and formation, I am equally convinced that the negatives must be given careful consideration before plunging in too deeply.

Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theories call attention to the active role of communities of readers in constructing what counts for them as "what the text means."³⁸ The emphasis of this model is on the role of readers as participants in the formation of meaning. Transforming effects (the factors that create meaning) may, therefore, depend on little more than reader-perceptions and reader-expectations against the background of linguistic conventions within given communities and traditions.

Reader-response theories embrace a wide variety of theoretical assumptions. These theories present some very pronounced philosophical difficulties about the role of the communication of knowledge in transmissive or communicative texts. These philosophical difficulties pertain to different approaches to language. For example, some claim that language is subsumed within the prior horizons of the reading-community. This would mean that "meaning" can only be derived from past norms. Yet, on the other side of this issue is the philosophy of language where engagements between readers and texts are seen as interactions between two horizons. This philosophy sees the possibility of expanded horizons as the historical meets with human life. This

Thiselton, 515.

has the potential of being quite formational because it seeks interaction for the purpose of expansion of horizons.

One of the leaders in reader-response theory is Wolfgang Iser. He proposes that there is a measure of incompleteness involved in all perception. Thus, the notion of "filling in the blanks" becomes the central theme in Iser's theory.³⁹ An example of this is when any of us look at an object we cannot see all the sides at one time, but we construe what lies beyond immediate perception. Iser extended this into literary narrative. A text may not specify whether an object such as a table, for example, has certain properties. It may not be specified whether it is wooden or plastic, has drop leaves or a single plank top, yet we regularly "fill in" what we presuppose and construe.

Iser also distinguishes explicitly between a theory of reader-response, which "has its roots in the text," and a "theory of reception" which arises from a history of readers' judgements.⁴⁰ The difference here is that in reader-response the participants seek to construct the meaning of the text through interaction, while the theory of reception deals with the expectations a reader brings to the text. He does not question the "givenness" of stable constraints in textual meaning. He does underline their potential and indeterminate status independent of actualization by the reading process. "Actualization is the result

Thiselton, 517.

Thiselton, 517.

of interaction between the reader and the text."⁴¹ This has the potential of being quite formative because interaction between the reader and the texts becomes the seeking of meaning (actualization). This requires openness and has the potential for aiding in the formational approach to the text.

Reader-response theory immediately brings to mind a positive aspect for informational reading, namely, the filling in of blanks. Information continually pursues the properties of the object in question. Much of what is construed comes as a result of the quest for knowledge concerning the object at hand. Information often presupposes certain things based on what is seen and known. In this light, information and reader-response are quite compatible. Since there are blanks to be filled in, the door is further opened for the quest of additional information.

In much the same way the above points may be helpful in formation. Formation is, in some respects, a filling in of blanks and dealing with our incompleteness. The major distinction between the formational approach and the informational is the work of God as we open ourselves for the purpose of being filled. The potential with reader-response for the purpose of formation becomes evident as it allows us to see where we are while the filling in of the blanks becomes the step toward wholeness.

Thiselton, 517.

Another potentially positive contribution of reader-response theories relates to the role of readers as active participants in the search for meaning. Readers involve themselves by filling in or completing a text's meaning. The purpose is to actualize (concretize, bring to completion for the reader) the text which otherwise might remain only as potential. This is akin to owning a particular book which graces the shelf but is never read. This theory establishes the expectation that reading the biblical text is not merely an exercise for passive spectators, but an eventful and creative process.⁴² This has the potential of being formational as it draws persons into God's creative process.

On the other side, however, is the negative potential of reader-response to both information and formation. If, for example, language is believed to be subsumed within the prior horizons of the reading-community, it would mean that meaning can only be derived from past norms. This would, in effect, limit the quest for information because all information would have been previously given. One may only speculate upon the impact this context would have on formation which must always break out of the old structures of being in order to truly become open to God's transforming grace.

Concluding Remarks Concerning Textual Theories

The various methods of textual theories offer insights into both the positive and negative aspects of those theories for informational and

Thiselton, 515.

formational reading. Each of the theories, no matter how moderate or extreme, does offer some benefits to both the informational and formational approaches to reading Scripture. In most theories there are avenues that allow for the possibility of openness to the voice of God. However, a word of caution is in order because the theories in and of themselves are void of the transforming work of God. Codes and the "filling in" of blanks may enhance information and formation. But, when these codes and blanks are recognized without hearing the voice of God they become something akin to a musical score being reproduced as "literature" without ever being played.

Informational Reading and Formational Reading

Informational reading can be characterized in a number of ways. First, it seeks to cover as much material as it can in as short of an amount of time as possible. In other words one seeks to absorb as much material as possible to give a broader range of perspective. Here one does not seek to focus on only one aspect of reading, but rather upon the "big picture" (an overview of the whole).

Second, reading informationally is linear (the process of moving through the parts). In informational reading one advances step by step covering the material sequentially to gain the broadest overview of the material.

Third, the desire is to master the text. Here one seeks to grasp the material for the sake of control. In doing this, one seeks to justify the control (interpretation), defending it against other interpretations. Here, perhaps more

clearly, the issue of preconceived ideas comes to light. Persons reading informationally are often convinced they already understand the text, and thus close the door on the possibility that any other interpretation could be correct.

A fourth element of informational reading is the manipulation of the text according to one's own purposes. Most of us have a set agenda from which we operate. Perhaps we have a point to make or prove. Therefore, a text may be maneuvered to make that point or prove our position. This may mean taking a text out of context. It may mean our approach to reading becomes critical or judgmental. Our own perception and desires often create such scrutiny.

A fifth characteristic of informational reading is a problem-solving mentality. Again this characteristic introduces the idea of control from our own perspective. It assumes that the reader already understands the text, and that generally there is some element that needs to be solved or fixed. This may become very apparent as the reader tries to explain a text to someone who indicates a lesser understanding of what was read. The attitude, based on the person's perceptual framework, often comes across as though there is a problem with the text, but "I" can straighten it out. This attitude demonstrates that we are approaching reading with a particular problem in mind and we are seeking information to fix it.⁴³

An example of this informational approach comes to mind out of personal experience. As a pastor preparing for Bible studies, I often found myself in a

Mulholland, 49-50.

hurry to learn as much of the particulars about a passage as possible. I felt the need to master the text in order to give as much information as possible to those who would attend the study. As for interpretation, I was convinced that I already had a solid grasp on the meaning, and other interpretations were generally unacceptable even though I may have given the appearance of listening to what others were saying. In other words, my perception of the way things should be dominated my thinking, and I attempted to dominate the thinking of others. Most significantly, I rarely, if ever, sought to listen to God in my preparations. The text was something to be read for as much information as could be found, analyzed to determine its value, and interpreted according to my understanding.

If the Bible is to be more than a mass of information dominated by our perceptual frameworks, or something to be mastered and controlled for our own purposes, there must be another approach. This approach must be one that frees persons from the need to control the text. This must be an approach to the Bible that allows God to have freedom to shape the life of the reader. It must be an approach that allows God to speak and the reader to listen. The formational approach will do all of this.

The formational approach is actually much more a mode or posture of being open to God, rather than a specific method of reading the Bible. In it there is a shift from being the master of the Word to being a servant of the

Word.⁴⁴ In such a shift the text becomes the master. We are no longer setting the agenda. We are free to listen to the voice of God.

The mode or posture of formational reading involves several aspects. For one thing there is the willingness to be open to God. In this approach one intentionally seeks to encounter God in the text. There is a surrender of the controls. We want God to work with us, shape us, and guide us. Such openness involves humility. When we humble ourselves before God we are able to acknowledge the truth of who we are and who God is. Our inner ears are opened, and God's voice resonates.⁴⁵ The word is no longer reduced to our purposes, but the greater purpose of God is revealed.

Formational reading also requires a docile stance. No longer is the reader concerned with covering vast amounts of material in a short time. The overriding concern now is to encounter God in the text. Such a stance increases the capacity to listen to God. It also opens the door for more profound understanding and living of the spiritual life message revealed by God. No longer does the reader need to be right all the time and the fear of being wrong is removed. In this stance obedience is the desire of the heart.⁴⁶

Susan Annette Muto, Steps Along The Way (Denville Dimension Books, 1975),

Susan Annette Muto, Pathways Of Spiritual Reading (Gordon City: Image, 1984), 78.

Muto, Steps Along The Way, 31.

Another area of importance in formational reading is listening. Reading is but one element in a four beat sequence: speaking, writing, reading, listening. Reading, as typically practiced (informationally), disconnects the terms of the sequence by pulling out the two middle ones and valuing them for their own sake. What this does is eliminate the living voice at one end and the listening ear at the other. It favors the written and read book which serves well our impersonal, technological society.⁴⁷

The Scriptures provide a means by which the speaker and the listener may be linked without being in the same room or the same century.⁴⁸ Listening is not always easy to accomplish, especially in our fast-paced society. The key to becoming a good listener, and thus linking speaker and listener, is to slow down. Full attention must be given to each passage, phrase, and word. Attention must be given to God, and every effort to become still before God must be made. As this is being accomplished it is time to ask; "Lord, what are you saying to me here?"⁴⁹

Listening is only possible to the degree in which we are willing to let go our own egotistic will and become inwardly and outwardly silent, alert, receptive, and attentive. In humble openness we turn to God setting aside any prior appraisal of the meaning or the way we will incorporate a passage into our

⁴⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, Working the Angles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1987), 69.

⁴⁸ Peterson, 69.

⁴⁹ Mulholland, 145.

spiritual development. Receptivity is essential for listening. Listening calls us to be released from willfulness, arrogance, and self-assertiveness. We become receptive to what we hear, and what we hear sinks from our minds into our hearts.⁵⁰

Another issue that must be dealt with is control. It has already been established that in the informational approach there is the tendency to want to master the text, and thus, bring it under our own control. Formational reading is quite the opposite. Control not only implies a firm grasp of the text (within the perceptual framework), but it also tends to be used to manipulate the text for one's own purposes. In formational reading one neither desires to control the text with his or her own point of view or manipulate it according to his or her own purposes. The purpose is to let go of the controls in order to encounter God in the text. The text then becomes the master. We are open to hear, to receive, and respond. We become servants of the Word, not masters of the text.⁵¹

The key to letting go of the controls is in knowing who we are. All of us carry special traditions, a set of values, a well-seasoned world view, complexities, and more wherever we go and what ever we do. When we approach Scripture we carry this baggage. It is important that we come to

Muto, Pathways Of Spiritual Reading, 83-84.

Mulholland, 54.

terms with "what lies under the hood."⁵² To do this we have to be able to see what we are. This includes seeing the things that feed us intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. It means recognizing our condition of wanting to be in control, and accepting the fact that we may not know it all.

God always intended for us to be a "word" spoken forth. It has always been God's intention that we do the will of God. Our desires should be God's desires. That is what should lie under the hood.

We begin to learn what is under the hood, or rather, who we are, when we accept Christ as Savior and realize we are God's creation. God spoke us forth before the foundation of the world to be a holy and blameless people. Whether for the first time or many reminders later when we accept who we are, we have taken a major step toward letting go. "The Christian conviction is that God speaks reality into being (creation into shape), salvation into action. It is also a Christian conviction that we are that which is spoken into a creation shape and a salvation action. We are what happens when the word is spoken."⁵³

As a "word" spoken forth by God we are a vehicle for the expression of that "word" in the world in which we live. God is seeking to bring to us the fullest expression of who we are.⁵⁴ But, this can never be as long as we cling

Wayne G. Rollins, Jung And The Bible (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 98-

Peterson, 62.

Mulholland, 36.

to the controls. And we shall surely keep holding on until we realize who we are. Letting go, because of our conditioning, may not be easy, but when we come to grips with who we are and God's greater purpose for our lives we can let go.

But, I should add a word of caution. Letting go is a life-long struggle. It is not impossible to let go, and the closer we become in relationship with God the more likely it will be that we can let go. Letting go may, however, be somewhat continuous throughout life. We will likely let go many times only to find ourselves taking charge again and again. But, as our relationship with God deepens we will have a greater desire to let go and want to do God's will.

As one reads formationally there is also the need to ask questions that help the reader to focus upon the life message contained in the text. Mulholland offers the following examples; "How do I feel about what is being said? How do I react? How do I respond down deep within? Why do I feel this way? Why am I responding in this manner? Why do I have these feelings within? What is going on inside? What do my reactions tell me about my habits, my attitudes, my perspectives, my responses and reactions to life?"⁵⁵ Other questions are appropriate also, but the point is that asking ourselves key questions will help us focus upon what God is trying to say to us in the text. Further, these questions will help us get in touch with any number of feelings and emotions that may surface along the way. These can be deeply moving

Mulholland, 24.

and growing experiences. The questions can help us see things about ourselves and God's purpose for our lives that we may otherwise miss.

It should be noted that the answers to the questions may result in needed changes in our lives. At times correction is necessary. At times repentance is needed. At other times there may be a need for a change in attitude. In all our goal is to be open to God that we may encounter God in the text. When openness prevails, we will grow closer to the living God.

The formational approach is characterized by focusing on a smaller amount of material at any given time. While the informational approach seeks to cover as much ground as possible very quickly, formational reading intentionally seeks depth and not quantity. This requires time. Information may offer certain insights that enhance our understanding of the Christian faith, but at the same time there may be no challenge to the way we live in this world.⁵⁶

The lack of time is often considered a major hindrance for many in this fast paced society, but the crucial element for those who seriously seek to draw closer to God is not time, but focus. In formational reading one focuses upon a much smaller portion of scripture than if seeking information. Your desire is to move deeper and deeper into the message given at a particular time. Of course this takes time, but again, focus is the key. In this mode (state of being) one is not seeking to read everything in a single setting. The goal is to

⁵⁶ Mulholland, 52.

open oneself to God. In so doing, the time spent is well spent because God's voice can be heard.

The goal of this chapter has not been to negate the importance of informational reading. There will always be a need for information. The goal has been to demonstrate the importance of another approach to reading, namely the formational approach. The formational approach is a mode of reading, not a method. By mode I mean a state of being. When one reads formationally he or she approaches the text with an open mind and heart focused upon encountering God. This does not suggest that there are no methods (the ways of accomplishing an end) involved. In chapter three some methods will be discussed. This mode allows readers the opportunity to encounter God in the text, to hear God's voice, to be receptive to whatever God would have them do, and to move deeper into their relationship with God as they encounter the life message which God is speaking in the Word.

The formational approach brings balance because it offers what information cannot, a movement from the mind to the heart. In formational reading one looks beyond the facts and figures that information can provide to a relationship with the living God. In formational reading one seeks to understand who they are and who God is. Persons seek to be conformed to the image of Christ. There is openness to respond to the message, and time is given to wait upon the Lord. Formational reading seeks to free us from perceptual frameworks that can bind us in our understanding of what

relationships with God is. In all, the formational approach to the Word of God is the balancing factor that frees us to be the "word" God intends us to be because it draws us ever deeper into that loving relationship with God that we were supposed to have all along.

CHAPTER 3

The Role of the Bible

Spiritual formation can be defined as "the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others."⁵⁷ One definition of religious experience is, "the dialogue between God and humankind."⁵⁸ A link that ties these definitions together is the Bible. The Bible is the record of this dialogue and has been viewed as such by Jew and Christian alike. Stanley points out in his study that the very arrangement of the Hebrew Canon of the Old Testament indicates Israel's awareness of this dialogue quality. Scripture consisted of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. "The concept apparently was that the Law and the Prophets were the word of God spoken to Israel, while the Writings contained Israel's response to the word, or reflections upon it."⁵⁹ Herein is the link. God speaks and we respond. If our response is one of openness to encounter God's voice we begin the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.

The New Testament can be viewed in much the same way. The Gospels, including Acts and the Apocalypse are considered to the Christian as the "word of this salvation" (Acts 13:26), while the letters of Paul and other

Mulholland, Jr. Invitation to a Journey (Downers Grove, IL; Intervarsity Press,), 15.

David M. Stanley, A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises, ago: Loyola University Press, 1967), 1.

Stanley, 2.

apostolic writings are viewed as the human response to "the message he (God) sent to the sons of Israel gospeling peace through Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:36).⁶⁰ As we respond to the message of God by accepting the peace of Christ the process of being conformed begins.

To merely stop here would be premature. Even though the Bible is the record of the dialogue between God and humankind, there is more. The Bible is also God's initiative in confronting humankind with the divine self-revelation and our human response of faith. David M. Stanley states;

Salvation history is fundamentally God's autobiography; and God must in consequence be regarded as the principle author of Sacred Scripture. But at the same time, the sacred books which contain the record of this divine condescension and initiative were written by human beings in human language, and hence are the concrete expression of these men's reply of loving obedience and faith to God's message.⁶¹

Thus, the Bible is God's initiative toward humankind. The human response was to place God's Word in written form while inspired and acting on faith. Conn, in his chapter, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?," describes inspiration as the "God-breathed" character of the product of the author's writing. "What is stressed is not the manner of Scripture's coming into being but its divine source."⁶² He concludes that inspiration is given no final explanation. II Timothy 3:16 considers the product of God's powerful inspiration breath. The

Stanley, 2.

Stanley, 2.

Harvie M. Conn, ed., Inerrancy and Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book Co., 1988), 56.

passage does not merely indicate the way in which his Spirit has engaged the lives and minds of the authors. Scripture came into being through a variety of modes, and is the result of the activity of divine power, through the Spirit.⁶³

Spiritual formation has relied heavily upon the use of the Bible for centuries. The Bible is not the only source of spiritual formation. But, because of its long recognized dialogue quality, the Bible has always been a principle arena for interacting with God. Later in this chapter we will examine how St. Ignatius attempted to demonstrate the importance of moving beyond the reading of the Word for the sake of becoming more knowledgeable to reading these Sacred Writings for the purpose of dialogue and interactions with God.

Jesus' Use of the Old Testament

With the thought of dialogue and interaction in mind it would be helpful to examine how Jesus himself used the Jewish scriptures. An important insight is Jesus' consistent treatment of the historical narratives as straightforward record of fact. Whether Jesus is referring to Abel (Lk. 11:51), Noah (Mt. 24:37-39; Lk. 17:26, 27), Abraham (Jn. 8:56), Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt. 10:15; 11:23, 24; Lk. 10:12), or any one of the repeated references to Moses as the law giver (Mt. 8:4; 19:8; Mk. 1:44; 7:10; 10:5; 12:26; Lk. 5:14; 20:37; Jn. 5:46; 7:19) Jesus consistently treated these

⁶³ Conn, 56.

historical narratives as fact.⁶⁴ This clearly indicates the totality of Jesus' belief that the Jewish scriptures are the Word of God. God spoke through these scriptures. Jesus' response was to accept them as fact.

Jesus also assigned supreme authority to the sacred writings. This authority is revealed clearly in the disputes he had with the religious leaders of the day. Tasker declares that the observance of the moral law contained in the Decalogue constituted for Jesus and the religious leaders the divinely appointed means of entering into eternal life.⁶⁵ "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments" (Matt. 19:17b). Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisees not because he was opposed to the written word of the Law, to which both he and they appealed, but because their formalism and casuistry (reasoning cleverly but falsely) of the legal system which the Pharisees had superimposed upon the Law left them insensitive to the true intent of the word of God. Matthew 12:11-14 demonstrates this very point. The Pharisees, so bound by their own tradition, would oppose healing on the Sabbath. Yet, by the same token, they would not hesitate to lift a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath. Jesus accused the Pharisees of caring more for the letter of the law than the spirit. The Pharisees seemed to care more for animal life than human. They were convinced that the observance of their own rules and regulations would

⁶⁴ John William Wenham, Christ And The Bible (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1973), 12-13.

⁶⁵ R. V. G. Tasker, Our Lord's Use Of The Old Testament (Dr. G. Campbell Morgan Lecture #5, Westminster Chapel: University of London, June 10, 1953) 5.

secure divine favor. Thus, they were blinded to Jesus in whom the divine Law found its perfect fulfillment.⁶⁶

Wenham supports the above claims. He declares that Jesus used the Old Testament as the "court of appeal" in matters of controversy. Our Lord does not call into question the appeal of the Pharisees and Sadducees to the Scriptures. He rebukes them for their failure to study them sufficiently profoundly, that is, to sense the spirit in which the Scriptures were written and obey them accordingly. Jesus does not even condemn them for their seemingly wasteful expenditure of time and effort on detailed legal formulation resulting from their study of the Torah. Their problem was that they left the weightier matters of the law undone.⁶⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matt. 23:23).

Jesus taught his disciples that his ministry was the "fulfillment" of the law. Jesus said; "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). This verse is followed by a reminder that not even the smallest letter of the law would disappear until all is accomplished (this present age brought to a close).

⁶⁶ Wenham, 16.

⁶⁷ Wenham, 17.

Our righteousness must also surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law or we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Jesus taught his disciples the need for obedience to the law, first and foremost in spirit, but also in letter."⁶⁸ This becomes even clearer in the "You have heard that it was said" passages in the remainder of Matthew 5. Here the contrast between Jesus' teaching and that of the legalistic interpretations is clarified. Regarding the subjects of murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, an eye for an eye, and the love of enemies, Jesus reveals the true intent of the Old Testament law with the words "But I tell you" followed by careful explanation. Take, for example, the subject of adultery. The legalistic interpretation tends to focus only on the act of adultery. Jesus takes the matter a step further. Not only is the action wrong, but Jesus looks at the human heart and mind as well. In God's sight lust of the heart is just as perverse as the action itself. For Jesus it is not merely what one actually does, but also what one considers in the heart. Here is the contrast between Jesus' teachings and the legalistic views of the Pharisees. Jesus reveals the formational heart of the Scriptures while the Pharisees tend to use them only at face value (information).

Jesus also taught that the Scriptures bear witness to him as Messiah. Jesus describes his impending death with the words; the Son of man goes as it is written of him" (Mark 14:21). Another example of this appears when the risen Christ was talking with two of his disciples while walking from Jerusalem

³ Tasker, 15.

to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27). In this encounter Christ, "beginning with Moses (Law) and the prophets," interprets "In all the writings the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). This is preceded by the exclamation: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Then in the Fourth Gospel Jesus declares to his opponents: "you search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39).

It becomes apparent that Jesus was trying to demonstrate to his followers and his opponents that the scriptures indeed bear witness to himself. Jesus saw himself as the fulfillment of what had been previously written in the Jewish scriptures.

It would never be enough to suggest that Jesus used the Old Testament only to demonstrate how he was its' fulfillment. Jesus was the incarnation of the Jewish scriptures. As the incarnation of the scriptures Jesus was able to demonstrate what it means to be "Shaped by the Word." He demonstrated the kind of strength, guidance, and direction the scriptures offer by living these attributes before us. Jesus' incarnate life is the living example of the very best of what it means to be "Shaped by the Word."

A fine example of how Jesus incarnates the scriptures is found in the account his own temptation in the wilderness. Three times he incarnates the scriptures as Satan tempts him. First he is tempted to turn stones into bread.

Jesus was, no doubt, physically hungry after fasting forty days in the wilderness. Satan attempted to provoke Jesus into the temptation by saying; "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matt. 4:3). At that moment the incarnate Christ demonstrated to the entire human race the strength that the scriptures offer to overcome temptation. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3). Here is a life "Shaped by the Word" at its very best. The temptation was overcome as Jesus lived the Word before us.

In the second temptation the story is no different. When tempted to put God to the test, Jesus again demonstrated the strength we can all draw from scripture by living it before us. Jesus does much more than quote Deuteronomy 6:16, he incarnates it.

When Jesus was tempted the third time he was taken to a very high mountain and there saw all the Kingdoms of the world. Satan said to Jesus that he could have it all if he would only bow down and worship him. Again, Jesus incarnates the scriptures that teach there is only one worthy of our worship. God alone is worthy to be worshipped and praised, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Deut. 5:9).

My point is very simple. Jesus incarnates the Scriptures. This is another aspect of his fulfillment of Scripture. For us it means that as the incarnate Christ, Jesus has demonstrated the very best of what it means to be "Shaped by the Word." The incarnation is a tremendous source of encouragement for

all Christians. Jesus gives us a look at what we can be. Being conformed to the image of Christ means that we enter an ever deepening relationship with our Savior. We see in Christ the very best we can be because he incarnates the Word.

Until the time of Jesus' ministry much of the approach to these Sacred Writings had been very legalistic. The Pharisees were bound by the oral law and expected others to be so. The oral law represents a great number of observations by succession from the fathers (earlier Pharisees) which were not written in the law of Moses. These were observations that became tradition over a long period of time. Thus, even though the masses awaited the coming of Messiah, Jesus, in the eyes of the leaders, did not meet the requirements because his approach to their oral law was much too lax. His opponents in particular were far more concerned with their images of carrying out the oral letter of the law than in becoming open to the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus did not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it and demonstrate the totality of its meaning as the incarnate word. This placed the law in a new perspective. Disciples were to obey it in spirit as well as letter. This teaching must be credited to Jesus.⁹⁹ Should we accept this teaching for ourselves, we too can be shaped by its' spirit as well as the letter.

⁹⁹ Tasker, 15.

Another area in which Jesus used the Jewish Scriptures was in his teachings. Throughout his teaching ministry Jesus made both direct and indirect references to these writings. An example of a direct reference to the Jewish scriptures is found in Matthew 21:12-16. Jesus was in Jerusalem and had entered the temple. There he overturned the tables of the money changers. Once before the temple had become a den of robbers (Jeremiah 7:11). Now it was happening again. In Jesus' day the commercialism in the temple was designed more for profit than for worship. After driving out the robbers, Jesus turned his attention to those with real needs. The robbers were the money changers whose responsibility was to exchange all foreign coinage to that of the coinage of Jerusalem. This exchange was a requirement. However, the money changers often made the exchange in a way that benefitted themselves. In other words, they cheated or robbed Jews who came from other areas and needed to exchange their coinage for that of Jerusalem. Following this the chief priests and scribes became indignant because he was healing many sick and the children were praising God by saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Then Jesus quotes from Psalm 8:2 (From the lips of infants you have ordained praise...) reminding us all that we who think we know so much have much to learn from the little ones around us. Those who thought ill of Jesus were never persuaded by his powers. Here the little ones perceived what was hidden from the eyes of the learned - that Jesus

is the Messiah. On that day Psalm 8:2 was fulfilled as the little ones praised God's Chosen One.

An example of how Jesus used the Jewish scriptures indirectly is found in Luke 12:13-15. Here, presumably the younger brother asks Jesus to confront his older brother bidding him to divide the inheritance. The younger brother wants his share. According to Jewish custom the older son in a family of two would receive two-thirds of the father's possessions.⁷⁰ One can imagine that the father of these sons has died and the older brother has not yet divided the inheritance. Jesus does not judge between them, but he does give warning regarding covetousness. Never directly quoting Exodus 20:17, Jesus taught that our lives do not consist of our possessions. To covet only threatens our relationship with God.

One of the keys to understanding the teaching ministry of Jesus is his attitude toward the Scriptures. The hearers of Jesus were not, for the most part, ignorant of the Scriptures. In fact many of them were quite learned. The real difference in Jesus' understanding was his emphasis on the weightier matters. By the term "weightier" I do not suggest that some passages of scripture are more important than others. It means that Jesus focused on what was at the heart of scripture (formational) as opposed to the letter of the law (informational). Because Jesus was the incarnation of the Scriptures, he could

⁷⁰ Charles M. Laymon, ed., The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary On The
2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 690.

demonstrate their true intent, as opposed to the legalistic interpretation of the Pharisees.⁷¹ For example, when Jesus wished to emphasize how easily preoccupation with the affairs of this life blinds the soul to the certain coming judgment, he reminds his listeners that in Noah's day eating and drinking, marriage and being given in marriage continued right up to the moment when the ark was sealed and the flood came (Lk. 17:27). This illustrates the importance of building a relationship with God. Life's preoccupations distract us from seeing our need to be in relationship with God. One might keep the letter of the law (going through the motions) while life goes on, "business as usual," missing out altogether on a relationship with God.

The most interesting aspect is that we see not only an exposition by Jesus on a given passage, but we also see the impact that these scriptures have had on his life as well. When confronted by the Pharisees, in particular one who was a scribe and trained in the exposition of scripture, about which was the greatest commandment, Jesus responded; "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). The quote comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. It is part of what was known as the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Quoted by orthodox Jews each morning and evening, the Shema emphasizes the importance of the love relationship between God and the Israelites. For Jesus, the quoting of the

⁷¹ J. I. Packer, Our Lord's Understanding of the Law of God (Glasgow, Pickering Inglis Ltd., 1962) 15.

Shema was not merely something to be done as a ritual. Certainly there is but one God, but to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind meant a total giving over of himself (surrender) to God. To love God was the only adequate way of fulfilling the commandment. This is what the commandment found in Deuteronomy 6:4 meant to him.

Although there is no doubt as to the extensive knowledge our Lord had of the Jewish scriptures, this knowledge was not legalistic (informational). His emphasis was upon what was at the heart and the true intent of the Scriptures (formational). In this context that Jesus lived by the Word of God. Even at the point of death on the cross, Jesus recalled the words of Psalm 31:5 and prayed, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Through the Sacred writings Jesus dialogued and responded to God in faithfulness and obedience. So, whether in his private time of temptation, his public time of teaching, or coming to grips with who he really was as the fulfillment of the Sacred writings, the Word of God had truly formed every part of his life.

The Old Testament Usage in the Early Church

The early church saw Jesus as Messiah. As Messiah, Jesus was called the Son of God. In the deepest sense, this title was expressive of the mysterious relation existing between the eternal Father and the eternal Son. John 3:18 calls Jesus the only begotten Son of God. As the Son of God, Christ is God with all the infinite perfections of the divine essence (John 1:1-14; 10:38). The claim to this title was put forth by Jesus himself (John

10:36), and urged by the apostles (Acts 9:20). All this was justified at Jesus' baptism. There the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and there was an audible voice from his heavenly Father (Matt. 3:16-17; Mk. 1:10-11; Lk. 3:22; Jn. 1:32-34). The apostle Paul lends further justification when he declared that Jesus was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). Thus, the people looked to Jesus.

In this portion of the study two main lines of thought will be examined. The first will deal with the tension created by legalism, arising out of the deeply ingrained beliefs concerning the law among the Jewish Christian leaders, and the Gentile converts who were previously never acquainted with the law. The second will examine the influence of Jesus upon the early church's view of the Jewish scriptures.

It would not be at all surprising to discover that among those earliest followers of Jesus there were those who accepted him as Messiah but, at the same time, did not see that they should give up their life-long observance of the Mosaic law. It would also be natural for such people to expect that even converts from among the Gentiles would live in obedience to God's law revealed in the Jewish scriptures.⁷² This latter issue came to a head in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas went to meet with the council in Jerusalem. There

⁷² Emil Schurer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1979) 314.

they testified to many things God had done through them to bring the Gentiles to faith. After a lengthy hearing, James declared that the Gentiles who had turned to God must not be troubled with circumcision but were to "abstain from pollutions of the idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20). This meant that the Gentiles were to abstain from forms of unclean food most offensive to Jewish scruples (food which had been offered to idols), the flesh of strangled animals because these would still contain the blood, unchastity because it was a sin particularly present among pagans, and blood which was not to be eaten because it was a form of ritual impurity and meant being cut off from the covenant community. The decision of the council was a compromise. This would be the minimum required for Gentiles to fellowship and worship with Jews in the role of "God Fearers." Although Gentile Christians were exempt from circumcision, the decree was necessary if Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were to be able to live together in a united church.⁷³

What was discovered at the council in Jerusalem was that if there was to be unity among the Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, certain ethical practices would have to be accepted by all. On the other hand, the Jewish tradition of circumcision was not the prerequisite for salvation. Salvation came through repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior. Ladd states it this way; "Since God had brought Gentiles to faith without the

³ Laymon, 749.

Law, there was no need to insist that the Gentiles become Jews to be saved."⁷⁴

To the Jewish Christian in the earliest days of the Christian church it would have been difficult at best to view the Jewish scriptures in any way other than what they were taught from their earliest days. To them the scriptures were not primarily works of law, or even exhortation and comfort. Nor were they primarily works of edification and history. "They are Torah, a divine instruction, commandment and revelation addressed to Israel."⁷⁵ Among the truly pious, there was a great love for learning, and the Torah was readily turned to as it represented general moral and religious culture. Such persons were sin-fearing and possessed some positive piety, not only that of charity, but other high qualities, mainly the careful avoidance of publicity making public displays of their religion. To be sin-fearing meant the deliberate avoidance of an action that constituted an offence even for the average Jew. The truly pious not only guarded against sin, but carried what was learned into effect. Such persons maintained a very strict observance of the duties expressing the honor, love, and worship of God. Piety was demonstrated by loving one another and observing conscientiously all the commandments. But,

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977) 355.

⁵ Schurel, 321.

as with any people, not all were absorbed throughout the entire week with such duties.⁷⁶

For the truly pious, the Torah was read with a greater purpose in mind than merely obtaining information. The Torah offered a means of opening one to vital union with God that was to be lived out in expressions of honor, love, and the worship of God. The scriptures were divine instruction. These persons loved to learn, but not just for intellectual edification. They practiced what they learned because the words spoke to them, and resulted in a love for one another and the conscious observance of the commandments. Their relationship with God was the source of all obedience and the origin of relationships with others. For them, the Torah was shaping their lives. The Jewish Christians would have understood their sacred writings formationally.

Let us now examine the influence of Jesus upon the way the Jewish scriptures were viewed by the early church. Even though these Sacred writings lose no sense of their authority under the influence of Jesus' fulfillment, Jesus does have a very distinctive influence upon their interpretation.

In Old Testament times, obedience to the Law was an expression of trust in God; and only those who offered God such trust were really his people. Israel was a nation and a spiritual people. Membership in the nation required obedience to the external commands, such as, circumcision; but circumcision

⁷⁶ Adolf Buchler, The Ancient Pious Men (New York: KTAV Pub. House, Inc., 8) 16, 31.

of the flesh did not make a person right with God; there must also be a circumcision of the heart (Jer. 4:4; Deut. 10:16).

During the intertestamental period a fundamental change occurred in the role of the Law in the life of the people. Ladd says: "The importance of the Law overshadows the concept of covenant and becomes the condition of membership in God's people."⁷⁷ Now, observance of the Law becomes the basis of God's verdict upon the individual. During this period the Law attained the position of an intermediary between God and humankind. Thus, the more one studied, the more life one had.

This does not mean that Judaism was totally void of spiritual values. The higher elements of inner devotion and piety were coupled with strict observance of the Law. At the heart of first century Jewish devotion, for example, was the recital of the Shema (Deut. 6:9) with its call to love God with the whole heart. Ladd points out, "The tendency to externalism is evident even at this point, for the very repetition of the Shema was seen as a submitting to the reign of God."⁷⁸

Against this backdrop Jesus would influence the view of scripture. In the Jewish world of the first century AD, Jesus was a man apart. Jesus was different not because of his complete reverence for the Jewish scriptures. He was different not because he studied them diligently and accepted their

⁷⁷ Ladd, 497.

⁷⁸ Ladd, 498.

teachings. The Scribes and Pharisees did this. Jesus differed from his contemporaries primarily because he was the Word made flesh. He was the Torah incarnate. His whole being was formed by the Word. Thus, when Jesus spoke concerning a passage, he spoke with the larger view in mind. He knew the original sense of the Word because he lived it. What had been lost of the original sense by the Jews was the need for circumcision of the heart. Jesus would renew the need for repentance. The Law was still to be observed, but not just externally. Jesus influenced his hearers by understanding the need for an inward movement of the heart toward God. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declares; "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (quoting Leviticus 24:20). But I say to you. Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:38-39). The attitude demonstrated here offers a clearer view of the intent of the scriptures. Taken externally one would simply strike back, but the inward movement of the heart toward God does not seek revenge. Here is just one of several examples where Jesus offers clarity to the original sense of Torah.

In short, the most significant influence Jesus had on the usage of the Jewish writings by the early church was the way in which he incarnated these writings before the people. The influence was such that even though such terms as "formative reading of the Word" would be foreign to the charter members of the church, formation in essence had to take place for a Jew to

understand God's salvation plan and their role in carrying out the work of the plan on earth. Jesus was the incarnation of the Jewish writings. As a result, he gave the early church a model of what it means to be shaped by the Word. As persons entered into vital union with Christ the risen Lord their desire was to become more and more like Jesus each day. As they read the Jewish writings they would be influenced by the way in which Jesus incarnated these words as told by those who knew him personally. Therefore, through the power of the Holy Spirit they would come under the very influence of the Master himself and these Sacred writings would shape their lives as well.

Early Formational Approaches

In this research portion of our research the emphasis will be upon formational approaches to the Bible. This is not intended to be comprehensive in scope, but merely to lift up two related approaches that have stood the test of time and are currently legitimate formational approaches to the Bible. The first part of this study will examine the formational approach of "Lectio Divina" (sacred reading) as developed by John Cassian and Benedictine spirituality. The second portion will examine the formational approach of Saint Ignatius of Loyola through, The Spiritual Exercises.

Lectio Divina is a method of prayer that has its roots in the fourth and fifth centuries. It involves four basis steps: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, and Contemplatio. Although Lectio Divina was likely brought from the Eastern desert fathers to the West by John Cassian at the beginning of the fifth

century, it has been closely connected to St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality since its organized development began in the communities of monks and virgins founded by St. Benedict.⁷⁹

The primary emphasis of Lectio is to open oneself to encounter the living God.⁸⁰ God is the ground of all truth and Lectio is the search for that truth. The key to this search is a deepening relationship with God. In this deepening relationship one discovers truth about God and self. The one seeking truth is looking for the Word God would have them hear at that time. Called spiritual reading, Lectio seeks to open persons to an encounter with the living God. In so doing, one discovers direction and guidance for daily living. Although God's truth is revealed primarily in the Sacred Scriptures, Lectio recognizes that God's revelation comes in other writings as well. But, no matter what the source, we should be reminded that Lectio has at its' heart an encounter with God.

Lectio calls persons to seek their most alert period of the day. It also works best while in a quiet comfortable place, free from distractions. In this setting one is best suited for spiritual reading. Although, one must not forget that these externals, while aiding in positioning persons for Lectio, must be accompanied by an internal posture, that is, openness toward encountering God. While in this setting one turns to the selected passage from the lectionary

⁷⁹ Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey, Prayer and Temperament (Irlottessville: The Open Door, 1984) 46.

⁸⁰ Michael and Norrisey, 32-33.

or some other spiritual writing poised to encounter God.⁸¹

Lectio approaches Scripture formationally. The text is approached with the expectation of hearing God's voice. One seeks to encounter God in the Word with complete openness. One reads the text and listens to God's Word as though each Word is addressed to him or her alone. The right spirit for spiritual reading is always to encounter God in the text. From the start, the reader is open to and values what the text offers. Openness best accomplished when the reader takes a docile stance in Lectio. A docile (quiet and unhurried) stance increases the capacity to listen and places the reader on the way to a more open and obedient encounter with God.⁸²

Meditatio is the second step in Lectio Divino. Meditatio welcomes the Word of God into our lives. Here the individual genuinely seeks a Word from God that is directly related to him or her. Having now received the Word through reading one now begins to reflect on and ponder what is read. But, it should be stated that meditation is not purely an intellectual activity. Meditation also involves the heart and the whole being. As Thomas Merton would declare; "the distinctive characteristic of religious meditation is that it is a search for truth which springs from love (for God)."⁸³ Through meditation

¹ Michael and Norrissey, 35.

² Muto, Steps Along the Way, 28-31.

³ Thomas Merton, Spiritual Direction and Meditation (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1960), 55.

the beauty and goodness of God's truth is discovered. God's revelation becomes personalized and thus brought to life.⁸⁴

Two basic means of personalizing the message are found in *Lectio*. One is by transposition and the other is by projection. In transposition (the Augustinian method) one tries to imagine these words being spoken directly to them, that is, as if God is speaking to them personally. In projection (the Ignatian method) the reader places himself or herself back into the biblical situation. Here one imagines that he or she is present as the words or events first occurred. From this experience God gives to the readers practical fruit.⁸⁵

Meditatio, or the meditative stance, is not a matter of imposing one's thoughts on reality but attending in quiet vigilance, in gentle reverence, to what is there. In *Meditatio* one listens and listening reminds us that spiritual formation is first a question of receptivity.⁸⁶

The third step is *Oratio*. *Oratio* is our response to God as we have been encountered by God in the text. This step can be viewed as a crossroad. *Oratio* is a response from the heart. Here persons must make the choice of accepting the Word of God or dismissing it. By accepting the Word persons are free to see its value and apply it to their lives. By rejecting it persons see the Word as having no real worth. In *Oratio* it is decided what, if any, changes

⁴ Michael and Norrissey, 36.

⁵ Michael and Norrissey, 34.

⁶ Michael and Norrissey, 36.

need to be made in life as a result of being confronted by the truth. This results in a deepening relationship with God. As Michael and Norrissey state; "Our response is experienced through words, thoughts, desires, feelings, resolutions, decisions, commitments, dedication; or through sorrow for past failures; through gratitude, praise, petition."⁸⁷ Oratio calls us to respond in some concrete way. Through acceptance one's heart is moved closer to God. Dismissal of the truth may take place when one becomes overly uncomfortable or unwilling to remain open to God. To respond this way may not be so final, but it is a step away from where God would have the person be. If we are truly engaged with God in the Word, which means truly listening, then a response will follow.

In Contemplatio, the final step of Lectio Divina, persons allow God to act in whatever way God chooses. This creates a union of love that results from our dialogue with God. Michael and Norrissey define this union as such: "This is meant to be the consummation of the union of our mind and God's truth, of our heart and God's love, of our life and God's life, of our person and the person of God."⁸⁸ All of this requires time. Distractions must be set aside and full attention given to the truth or work at hand. Sometimes our awareness of any particular union with God may be unclear, but through

¹⁷ Michael and Norrissey, 34.

¹⁸ Michael and Norrissey, 34.

patient waiting for this union, the evidence of what is happening will be the fruit we bear.⁸⁹

Muto says; "To contemplate means to be in the temple of the Lord, sensing, believing, and experiencing that we are actually in his presence, that he is in us and we are in him."⁹⁰ Openness to the invitation of God is essential. The risk of renewal is involved, but this journey to union presupposes a dying and a rising. What must die is the illusion that our functional ego is all-powerful. Once the imprisoning restrictions of self-centeredness are shed, we are able to acknowledge our dependency on God. The process is slow, but here lies the fruit.⁹¹

The steps of Lectio Divina offer a means of being conformed to the image of Christ. Lectio seeks to open persons to an encounter with God. Meditatio seeks a Word from God. Oratio is our response to God. Contemplation allows God to act in whatever way God chooses, which create a union of love. Together, these steps offer a formational approach that will allow God's Word to shape our lives.

Saint Ignatius

One of the most formidable individuals to undertake a formational approach to the Bible was Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The Spiritual Exercises,

⁹ Muto, Pathways of Spiritual Living, 127.

⁰ Muto, Pathways of Spiritual Living, 127.

¹ Muto, Pathways of Spiritual Living, 129.

though written in the early sixteenth century, have stood the test of time as an outstanding method for any who desire a close relationship with God. The very purpose of the Exercises is defined in the title: Spiritual Exercises whereby to conquer oneself, and order one's life, without being influenced in one's decision by any inordinate affection. "This title does not appear on the first page of the book, but is placed after the twenty Annotations, which form a kind of introduction to the Exercises themselves."⁹² The Exercises were offered that persons might order their lives after the will of God.

The Exercises are primarily the record of Ignatius' own spiritual experience while on retreat at Manresa, and gives us an outline that commemorates the life of Jesus Christ. Those using this method of prayer try to project themselves back into the historical event and become a part of it in order to draw some practical fruit (real sorrow, joy, or resolution) for their life.⁹³

The Exercises are basically offered for a retreat setting, and for the use of a spiritual director. As Kenneth Leech appropriately states; "the Spiritual Exercises are a treasury of spirituality, and the purpose of them is to enable the individual, with good direction, to discover the right form of prayer."⁹⁴ It must be stated, however, that the Exercises are not restricted from being used

⁹² Kenneth Leech, Soul Friend (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Pub., 1977) 149.

⁹³ Tad Dunne, Spiritual Mentoring (New York: Harper Collins Pub., 1966) 111.

⁹⁴ Leech, 149.

as a regular means of spiritual reading. Dunne in his book, Spiritual Mentoring, says, "I consider any withdrawal from immediate concerns to assess and integrate one's life a "retreat."⁹⁵ He also considers a spiritual director as a spiritual mentor. This means that any person who can provide psychological insight, moral advice, or spiritual guidance can be a spiritual companion. Therefore, it is conceivable that one could use the Exercises alone, but having a spiritual mentor to turn to periodically will be a valuable help to the one attempting to be free from any inordinate attachment.

Leech states that the work of Ignatius is by no means obsolete and quite valuable today in three specific ways. "First, in the concern to create a way of avoiding the pitfalls of subjectivism and objectivism and his balanced sense of the relationship between the human and the divine."⁹⁶ We all have ideas and opinions (subjectivity) which often hinder us in our attempts to be open to God. Further, we may equally be hindered by objectivism which holds that only those elements which are external or objective are real and worthwhile. As for our relationship with God Ignatius guides us toward oneness and dependence. Perhaps the thought of being conformed best describes the sense of oneness with God. Additionally, as a relationship with God deepens one comes to realize the importance of one's dependence upon the creator God. God not only made us, but sustains us as well. "Secondly, Ignatius offered very precise

⁵ Dunne, xiii.

⁶ Leech, 149.

guidance on techniques to aid the growth of prayer."⁹⁷ This, in particular, is extremely helpful toward gaining and maintaining an inner posture for spiritual reading of the Scriptures. "Thirdly, in the high value he places on the imagination."⁹⁸ This third principle reflects one of the methods used in the second step of *Lectio Divina*, namely, *Meditatio*. In *Meditatio*, one imagines that he or she is hearing the words as if spoken directly to them, or one imagines that he or she is actually living the event for the purpose of drawing closer to God.⁹⁹ In formational reading the Exercises can, therefore, be an effective method used to help individuals make the shift from an informational approach. The Exercises help free us from perceptual frameworks that might otherwise hinder us from hearing the voice of God.

Here is an example of how the Exercises work. Beginning with a prayer, the exercitant begs God for grace that all intentions and actions be directed purely to the praise and Service of Almighty God. Prayer is followed by the first prelude where the exercitant now contemplates or meditates on something visible. When Christ is the focus, for example, the exercitant imagines seeing him in a material place, such as, the temple or on the mountain. In such a case where the focus is sin, the exercitant may imagine his or her soul as a prisoner in a corruptible body. Then comes the second prelude where the exercitant

¹⁷ Leech, 149.

¹⁸ Leech, 149.

¹⁹ Stanley, 6.

asks God for what he or she wants and desires. If the contemplation focuses upon the Resurrection the exercitant asks for joy with Christ in joy. Or in contemplating the passion one would ask for sorrow, tears, and anguish with Christ in anguish.

The first prelude is followed by certain points that further draws the exercitant to recall the first sin, which was that of the angels. If their one sin caused them to be cast out of heaven into hell, how much more deserving of this plight should be the exercitant who has committed many sins? Then one may recall the second sin which was committed by Adam and Eve when they violated the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge. Thus, corruption came upon the human race and many are lost as a consequence. And once again the exercitant considers a third sin, namely, that of the one condemned to hell because of one mortal sin. The consideration here is that many are lost for fewer sins than the exercitant.

All of this ultimately helps to bring about a resolution to deepen the relationship with God within the exercitant. At this a colloquy is used which is made by speaking exactly as one would to a friend. In this colloquy one might imagine being present before Christ as he hangs on the cross. The exercitant speaks with the Lord asking such questions as; "What have I done for Christ?" or "What should I be doing for Christ?" These questions lead to

a time to ponder those things that come to mind. Following this the exercitant would close with a prayer.¹⁰⁰

Since the Exercises are based upon meditations from the Bible, their primary purpose is to allow the exercitant to encounter God in the text. The reading of Scripture should be carried out in a way that truly involves the whole person. This means that from the very beginning the exercitant is attempting to fully surrender to God and remain open to what ever God will reveal. The Exercises allow this to happen with the aid of imagination as the reader projects himself or herself back into the setting in which the event took place. The exercitant is then able to apply what God reveals in the present walk with God. As David Stanley so clearly states; "The Ignatian contemplation aims at showing the exercitant how to integrate himself into the dialogue between God and man in his own era and culture."¹⁰¹ The whole person must be caught up and committed to assuming his or her rightful place in the ongoing relationship with God which is contemporary salvation history.

David Stanley states it this way;

It is this "putting oneself into the picture," so to say, which St. Ignatius wishes us to accomplish by the contemplation (living in union with God). I must endeavor, with grace, to put myself into the religious attitude symbolically represented by listening, seeing. Through the contemplation of some scene from the biblical narrative of salvation I can "hear" what Jesus Christ says to me

⁰⁰ Louis J. Pulh, S.J., The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951) 25-28.

⁰¹ Stanley, 6.

in my own existential situation; or I can "see" what he intends to accomplish through me in my world of the twentieth century. In short, I must somehow learn to behold Christ as he confronts me in my own particular and personal chapter of sacred history. Through this religious experience of the Ignatian contemplation I am fashioned into a witness for Christ.¹⁰²

Christ does confront as persons learn to listen and see what he is saying in the Bible.

The Ignatian prayer is one example of a lasting attempt to approach the Bible formationally. But, it should be added that after examining this method, although it is possible to use it as a regular means of spiritual reading, it will be best suited for those persons who can work with a spiritual mentor who already has some depth of understanding of the Exercises. I base this conclusion upon my own struggles to grasp the Ignatian prayer, and the fact that I was fortunate to have a spiritual mentor for a period in my life. The value of having such a person to share the areas in which God was dealing in my life, be they struggles or joys, was priceless. Since the Bible is far more than a source of historical information, the Exercises are offered as one possible means of allowing persons to be conformed to the image of Christ.

The steps of Lectio Divina and the Spiritual Exercises represent prime examples of the formational approach to the Bible. Although centuries old, these approaches have lasted because they fulfill an effective means of encountering God. These steps are not automatic. They require openness to

¹⁰² Stanley, 6.

God and a willingness to give ample time to wait upon the Lord. Should persons be willing to enter into such a posture the voice of God will be heard and they will encounter God in the Word.

Summary

Jesus, the incarnate Word, demonstrated in his life on earth what it means to be shaped by the Scriptures. He would influence all generations in the way the sacred pages should be read by his ability to demonstrate the spirit of the law, and not just the letter. He focused on the heart of the Scripture. He demonstrated the original sense of what the Scriptures were all about which was largely lost by many of the Jews living in his day. This has had and continues to have a profound influence upon the way followers approach the Sacred writings.

Since Jesus' time on earth, others have offered ways of formationally approaching the Scriptures. Two early approaches were examined. One was lectio Divina (sacred reading). Lectio is a method of prayer that takes the reader through four steps that lead from a search for divine truth to the union of our mind with God's truth as one turns to the Scriptures. Also examined was The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The Exercises help free us from perceptual frameworks that might hinder us from hearing God's voice.

From the time of Jesus to the present, the Scriptures have provided us with a wealth of information, but these pages hold far more than information. The Scriptures also provide a means of spiritual formation as we encounter

God in the text. When we open our hearts and minds to the voice of God, our lives can never be the same. The Word is now able to shape our lives by conforming us to the image of Christ.

CHAPTER 4

Preparation for the Project

The goals and objectives of this project include: (1) learning the differences between an informational approach, that is, reading to gain knowledge or control of a text for a particular purpose, and a formational approach to Scripture that allows persons to listen and be shaped by God, (2) to learn the mode of being required in a formative approach, (3) expose the group to various exercises in formative reading to experience this vital approach to the Word, (4) using a "formative reading" approach to Scripture meditation in private and corporate devotions in order to deepen relationship to God. Therefore, the primary goal of this project was to utilize a formative approach to Scripture in order to bring the participants into a relationship with God that would allow them to respond to God with openness and a willingness to become conformed to the image of Christ.

The project began with the Congregational Reflection Group (CRG) which was assembled for the purpose of giving prayerful support and encouragement to me throughout the Doctor of Ministry program. I also sought their wisdom and guidance as the project was being focused. The role of the CRG was intentional because, as facilitator, I felt it important that at least these persons be familiar with the formational approach as well as already having some experience with the types of exercises and disciplines needed to hear the voice of God while reading the Bible. The CRG was introduced to the formational

approach during the monthly meetings lasting one year prior to the project. They were introduced to formation by reading Shaped by the Word, and discussions related to the subject. Their familiarity was important because of the limited number of weeks the larger group would be together during the project. These persons would also become a great help to those who would participate, not only in offering understanding of a formational approach to the Bible, but also in helping to facilitate activities within the smaller groups that would frequently meet together during the weekly meetings.

The CRG was assembled, initially, to fulfill a requirement in the doctoral program. It consisted of five persons from the congregation of the Winfield United Methodist Church. Educationally, three were college graduates, and two had completed high school. All the members were from middle class backgrounds. One was retired, while two work as teachers in public schools. The others were not working outside the home by choice. These were also persons who were very stable in their faith. Most had been Christians for quite some time. They were also well versed in the Scriptures, and had developed very meaningful devotional lives. This group although assembled to fulfil a requirement, became a very important part of my life because of their faithfulness, prayers, and encouragement.

The CRG was called together on February 14, 1989 to begin what would prove to be a very rewarding experience for all involved. This group was continually being prepared for the project: (1) They learned about the doctoral

program at Asbury Theological Seminary. The purpose of this was to help the participants understand the requirement of their involvement, and, most importantly, my need for their support throughout the project. (2) We discussed at length the nature of spiritual formation, which has to do with our being conformed to the image of Christ. (3) The group experimented with keeping journals, which is one of the spiritual disciplines used in reflecting upon God's voice (a key component of the project). (4) We learned the difference between the informational and formational approaches to Scripture. (5) The CRG was also exposed to and became familiar with the principle secondary source, Shaped by the Word, by M. Robert Mulholland. This book, along with the primary source, the Bible, would form the principle texts for the project. Additional material was introduced in the form of exercises from the works of Susan Muto. These included meditation, prayer, and contemplation. (6) We practiced being open to God, and learned to clear the air of all that might potentially distract us from what God would have us hear. Through all this the CRG was being prepared to help facilitate the larger group that would participate in the project. For one year the CRG worked toward being prepared for this project. The members were extremely dedicated, and would prove to be most helpful when the project began.

Being convinced that the formational approach to God's Word would prove to be vital for spiritual growth and a deepening relationship with God, the project began on Wednesday, February 7, 1990. The group was made up of

the CRG and the Wednesday night Bible study group. The Bible study group is made up of core members of the congregation. The group is somewhat diverse, in that there are persons of different educational background, long time Christians as well as relatively new converts, and persons from various walks of life. In all there were twenty-five participants in the project which lasted through May. We met for a total of sixteen weeks. For additional information regarding attendance see chapter 6 under the heading of The Project.

The Wednesday night Bible study group was asked in advance to prayerfully consider being a part of this project. They were given a sketch of the kinds of things we would be doing and a sense of what to expect. This sketch included: reading selected Scripture passages formationally, reading Shaped by the Word, practicing various spiritual disciplines aimed at developing a mode for listening to God, keeping a journal, and having discussions in both the large and small group settings related to what God was showing us. The group was also told of the goals and objectives for the project. The group was then given one month to pray and come to a decision as to whether they would participate or not. All those who regularly attend did agree to take part in the project with the understanding and covenant that they would be faithful in attendance, and open to what God was going to do for us.

Because much of the work previously done by the CRG was repeated in one form or another with the larger group, it is not necessary to go into great detail at this point as to their activities. The primary difference between the

meeting schedules of the CRG and the Wednesday night group, which included the CRG, is that the CRG met only once a month for the year prior to the project, while the full group met weekly for four months. As a result, the weekly meetings allowed us to go into more detail and practice the spiritual disciplines to a greater extent. The CRG was able to help facilitate much of the work during the weekly meetings because of their prior experience.

The Project: Week By Week

Week 1: February 7, 1990

The first session was primarily geared toward orientation. Although the participants had been given a sketch of the kinds of work we would be involved with, much of this needed to be repeated. There were a number of questions about the project, expectations of the group, and numerous questions about the doctoral program itself. The questions concerning the doctoral program came as an expression of the group's interest in me, and the contribution they were making to my continuing education.

By design, this session would last two hours with a ten minute break following the first hour. As facilitator, I utilized the first thirty minutes to present an overview of the project as well as some of my goals and dreams for the group. My primary emphasis was upon the hope that the formational approach to God's Word would help the group become more open to God through the practice of being attentive to God's voice through the Scriptures.

These introductory remarks were followed by thirty minutes of questions and answers. Most of the questions related to the work we would be doing. The primary questions dealt with a desire to better understand what formation is, and why such an approach was important. Because these issues would be dealt with in much greater detail in subsequent sessions I attempted to share only key words of significance in this time of orientation. I declared that formation has to do with our being conformed to the image of Christ and explained that this was a life-long process that would not be attained in four months of intensive work together. At best, we would open doors and avenues to allow for a closer walk with God in this process. As to the importance of our work, my comments flowed out of my personal experience of reading the Word for the sake of gleaning information to conduct a Bible study or preach another sermon with little time given to allow God's voice to penetrate my own heart. After a short break, I introduced the book Shaped by the Word, by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. Members of the CRG were already familiar with the book, but for the rest of the group this was their first exposure. It was agreed that the approach to this book would be slow and intentional. The chapter or, as would often be the case, portions of a chapter for study and discussion would be assigned at the close of each session.

Following the introduction to Shaped by the Word, the group was then asked to join me in the sanctuary for a brief covenant service in which we would all commit to being faithful to God during this project, faithful to uphold

on another during our work together, and faithful to do all we could to become open to God through the Word. The prayer time was followed by the breaking of bread and sharing the cup in Holy Communion. After a hymn, we departed.

Week 2: February 14, 1990

The second session was marked by a discussion centering around the subject of Spiritual Formation. In this discussion we talked about what it meant to be conformed to the image of Christ. This led to a number of questions concerning Christ himself. What was he like? How did he conduct himself? In what ways did he witness to God (publicly), and how did he relate to God privately? The group then spent some time privately writing their own definitions. Here are some examples: (1) Spiritual formation deals with my daily walk with the Lord. It is my walk that brings me closer to Christ. By this walk, depending upon my faithfulness, I can become more like Jesus in through, word, and deed. (2) Spiritual formation has to do with what Jesus is doing in me. (3) Spiritual formation is my openness to God. I am the clay. God makes me as he wills. (4) Spiritual formation gives identity to every Christian. It has to do mostly with what is going on inside me as I strive to follow God's will. (5) Spiritual formation is the means God uses to show me his will and help me live by it. Twenty other definitions were written that evening. Some were not shared with the whole group, but all were kept by the individuals who wrote them for the purpose of future comparison.

We then discussed how spiritual formation takes place in our lives. A number of suggestions were made which included prayer, fasting, worship, fellowship with other believers, and reading the Bible. This led to a time of sharing among the group as to the nature of how these activities conform us to the image of Christ. It was suggested, for example, that prayer was a vital means of being conformed because it places us in direct communication with God. It was further emphasized that this is most effective when we are willing to listen for God's response, and far less effective when prayer consists primarily of a list of requests. Another believed that worship was the most significant means of being conformed. By giving praise and thanksgiving to God one becomes open to God. Such experiences allow us to be more willing to be and do what God desires.

When it came to the issue of reading the Bible the following suggestions were given by members of the group to demonstrate how God's Word conforms us to the image of Christ.

- 1) It is the inspired Word of God, therefore, God speaks to us as the Bible is read.
- 2) It offers practical guidelines for Christian living.
- 3) It offers us experiences faced by others for the purpose of showing us how to be more like Jesus.
- 4) It continually offers us new insights.
- 5) It gives spiritual vitality.

- 6) It gives us the knowledge of who God is, and the way in which God wants us to follow.

After these six suggestions were given, I then asked the group to consider in greater detail the first suggestion given. In order to give consideration to the first items, the group was assigned chapters 2 and 4 of Shaped by the Word. In addition 2 Timothy 3:16-17 was assigned to be read daily for the purpose of devotion and asking the questions, "What is God saying to me in this passage?"

Week 3: February 21, 1990

After a brief devotional period we entered a discussion of our findings in chapters 2 and 4 of Shaped by the Word. This promoted sharing about how to listen to God, and how to respond to what we hear. The key point made in this time was the importance of asking the right question; "What is God saying to me?" As to the way we respond, it was suggested that it is vital to pray and prepare for what we will hear. Such preparation will open us more readily to accept what we hear, even if it means some changes need to take place in our lives. Further, we dealt with the fact that God speaks to us at deeper levels, that is, those areas of our lives in which we have preferred to maintain control, and that we must be prepared to respond with openness to God when this occurs.

We also discussed perceptual frameworks and their effects upon us. Some examples were shared within the group of what this is all about. One

example given was that many of us fail to see the relevance of Scripture for today because it was written so long ago. Other examples included such notions as: miracles were given in those days for specific purpose to demonstrate God's power in some way but such things no longer occur. Some suggested that those who were demon-possessed were actually mentally imbalanced. Although many in the group had worked through these notions to more openly accept the Scriptures as relevant in all ways, these and other examples demonstrate how our perceptual frameworks do indeed affect our view of what we read.

Because of time limitations, this discussion would have to be continued at the next meeting. We did, however, take time near the end to break into five small groups to talk about our thoughts concerning 2 Timothy 3:16-17. One of the key thoughts arising out of this was that the Scriptures are "God breathed." This means that the Word contains life. The words on the page are not merely to be read, but are life-giving when read in the context of God's grace. That is why the Scriptures are "profitable" for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The Scriptures bring life to those who desire it because God's life-giving breath touches every word.

Week 4: February 28, 1990

Upon gathering for this session, the group had been reassigned chapters 2 and 4 and asked to specifically focus on themselves as a "Word" of God. We first dealt with the unfinished work of the week before. The central focus

was how the Scriptures can free us from our perceptual frameworks by learning to listen to the voice of God. Old habits can be broken when placed in the light of seeing life through God's eyes. The key to this is honesty. Honesty with ourselves and God. Such honesty is central in our becoming open to the voice of God. When we find ourselves in such a mode we are much more willing to accept the Word of God for our lives. After this discussion we turned our attention to the topic of this session concerning who God made us to be.

The fact that our existence was no accident, and that God purposed us into being was for many in the group a new and fascinating subject. We talked about attitudes and how these are shaped positively or negatively depending whether we are being led by the Word of God or the values of this world. Worldly influences tend to create within us selfishness. As humans we often desire to be in control of our lives, and therefore place our trust in God last. Our attitudes reflect an image of our being capable of handling everything on our own. Quite to the contrary, when our attitudes are shaped by the Word of God, we are no longer desirous of being in control. We are free to trust God, and we are able to relinquish control because we understand the consequences of trying to work everything out on our own.

We further discussed the importance of being open to the Word of God because without such openness we can never truly become all that God intends us to be. Such openness comes through invitation. The key to our becoming open is our willingness to allow God freedom to lead and speak, even if that

Word means correction for us. Our inviting God to have this freedom helps us relinquish control, and gives God the freedom to speak the Word we need to hear. Thus, our time in the Word is best spent when we begin with a simple prayer that invites God to show us what we need to hear.

At the close of our time together the group was assigned the fifth chapter of our text, and asked to ponder daily Romans 7:19 which deals with the subject of doing not the good we want and doing the evil we do not want.

Week 5: March 7, 1990

The group had been asked to read chapter 5 for this session. The material in this chapter deals with information and formation. Although the group had been exposed to the differences to some degree, the study of this chapter helped us to truly focus upon those different approaches and the importance of the formational approach for the purpose of being open to God while reading the Bible.

It was determined by the group that information has a very important place in our lives by supplying much needed data concerning such things as background material, learning about the way of life in particular Biblical eras, and helping us to understand the context in which passages were written. Yet, after being exposed to this material it was generally agreed upon that the formational approach, which allows us to become the listeners instead of the one in charge, was vital for balance in our reading of the Word.

Following the overview of chapter 5 the group broke into their respective small groups to discuss Romans 7:19. Gleanings from the small group discussions indicated that doing the good we want versus the things that are wrong is an ongoing struggle for most. Most of us put off the things that are really important for things we believe, at the time, are more important. Often we lose sight of those things most significant because we are still trying to be in charge of our affairs. The sin nature dominates in such times. Listening to God rather than ourselves or others is the key to victory. Being consciously aware of God's presence gives us inner strength and courage to do what is right. At the close we had prayer and the group was assigned to read any selection of Scripture of their choice, and they were to read that passage daily, practicing what they had learned about formational reading.

Week 6: March 14, 1990

As we gathered, the group was asked to find another person with whom they would like to spend the evening sharing their findings as they listened to the Word of God in the particular passage they had selected the week before. As facilitator, I felt this exercise would be more effective if done one on one. With as many as four or five in a group it would be difficult for each person to have adequate time to openly share what God had been sharing with them as they listened for God's voice.

Interestingly, almost half the group shared that they had difficulty focusing upon the voice of God. Most had selected familiar passages, and only

four out of twenty four present that night truly felt God had spoken a specific "Word" to them. Others believed that they were truly open to God, but did not pick up on any certain thing God was trying to say. One of the discoveries that came out of our discussion was that most tended to rush through the assignment. Each day they were faithful to read their passage, but most truly needed to slow down and give God a chance to speak. As a result, the group was reassigned their passages with the mandate to slow down and take notes each day regarding any signals they believed to be from God, any special feelings, any problems, or anything else that might come up.

Week 7: March 21, 1990

This week the group would again get with their partner, but first we discussed some of the over-all feelings and differences of approach from the previous week. It was generally found that several more in the group felt better now that they had slowed down. Some were still struggling with this. Taking notes helped the majority of the participants because it forced them to reflect more on what they had read. This led to a brief discussion on journaling, and it was suggested that in the next session we pursue this discipline further. As facilitator I agreed to do so. My preparation for the week was to re-acquaint myself with Ronald Klug's book How To Keep A Spiritual Journal. The rest of the group was asked to continue reading their passage formationally, and also read 2 Peter 3:18 each day and reflect upon the ways in which they were growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Week 8: March 28, 1990

Keeping a spiritual journal was something new to most of the group. The members of the CRG were already acquainted with it, but only one fourth had continued the practice with any regularity. During the session we talked at length about the value of keeping a journal. The primary point made in regard to this was that a journal helps us to grow in self understanding. Journaling is an excellent tool for measuring growth and making it much easier to focus upon listening to God as we read the Word.

We also talked about the mechanics of getting started. I emphasized that these journals would be private documents of personal thoughts and feelings. Never would I ask to see what was written on the pages, and only by free choice would anyone have to share anything of what they had written. After more discussion, all in the group agreed to make at least three entries each week during the remainder of the project.

Near the close we openly shared thoughts upon ways in which we felt we were growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. Some of the ways shared included: sensing a greater awareness of God's presence, not being so rapid to jump to conclusions, being more comfortable reading passages of Scripture that bring about correction or change of direction, and being more patient when waiting upon the Lord is necessary. The next assignment was to read chapter 6.

Week 9: April 4, 1990

For this session chapter 6 had been assigned. This chapter deals with the "Iconographic" nature of Scripture (verbal windows that draw us into the Word). An icon is generally a picture. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition an icon is usually an image of Christ, the virgin Mary, or one of the Saints painted on wood or ivory. The purpose of an icon is to draw persons inward to God. In Scripture, words can become icons which help draw persons inward to God. A formational mode opens us to be receptive to the Word, and enables us to approach the text as an icon.

We discussed as a group how certain words present strong images in Scripture. Such words tend to draw us into the event or scene in which the text is portraying. As a result, these words help us to see that the message is for us and not merely something to be examined and later forgotten.

After some discussion concerning this subject the group was asked to close their eyes and listen to the reading of Psalm 23. As they listened intently to the reading they were asked to form mental images or icons as key words came to mind. The reading was slow which meant that those listening had time to draw particular images in their minds. Afterwards each person was given a little more time to reflect on what they had heard and to write down those images that came to mind. Here are the results of the experience: Five persons shared that they imaged themselves being in a beautiful meadow by a gentle flowing stream living in perfect peace. The next, and most common

image, shared was that of a warm hearted shepherd watching tenderly over his sheep. This particular image generated not only a sense of peace, but security as well. Two persons in the group had recently lost loved ones. For them death came immediately to mind. The image one saw was that of God carrying him through a very dark place toward a great light. As long as he was in God's arms, he was comforted. Both envisioned being surrounded by the peace of God's great love. One final image was that of a huge table laden with food. This too produced a sense of security. However, most who dwelt upon this image seemed to focus upon the abundance of the riches of God. God is merciful and never runs short when it comes to supplying our needs.

Key words such as shepherd, green pastures, comfort in death, table, and a cup running over did produce windows into which the group could climb in and be a part of the passage. These icons allowed the group members to see themselves in the Psalm. Thus, for many this very familiar chapter could now speak a word from God like never before.

For the next week the assignment was to read in Luke 15, the story of the prodigal, using this same exercise. They were to record in their journal any significant images, words, or thoughts. They were also to continually ask the question; "What is God trying to say to me in this story?"

Week 10: April 11, 1990

We began our discussion of Luke 15 by identifying the main characters in the story of the prodigal. Then the question was raised; "As you entered

into the story, with which character did you identify?" The results were as follows. Only one person identified with the younger brother. Two persons identified with the father on the basis that they had been through a similar experience. The remaining twenty-three persons identified with the elder brother. This, of course, was not all for the same reasons. Most tended to identify with him on the basis of his loyalty to his father and home. Only four of the twenty-three identified with him on the basis of the way he acted and felt toward his younger brother. Although the rest believed they could never feel badly toward a younger brother or sister in a similar situation, they did express the need to be more protective of the younger and offer council that the younger might never go so far astray.

The group also expressed much more sympathy toward the younger brother citing that the elder had no excuse for the way he acted because he still had what was rightfully his. Those who identified more directly with the elder brother were quick to point out that it likely took this event in his life before he would realize just what he had. All that the father had was his, but it never hit home until he worked through the jealousy and threat of his brother's return.

Those who identified with the father pointed out that when genuine love exists between a father and his children, even the worst offenses cannot shatter that love. Because they knew what it was like to lose a child, they could easily identify with the longing in the father's heart.

The one person who identified with the younger brother said very little during the course of the discussion. However, near the end he tried in a humble way to express that what the younger brother experienced could happen to anyone. The temptation is real, and sometimes it can get the best of us. Often when this happens, as was his case, rock bottom must be felt before coming to your senses. When it does, all you want to do is go home. Then he made the most important statement of all; "When you get there all you can hope is that someone will let you come in."

This, in an abbreviated form, was our discussion for the evening. What typically would have been a one hour meeting had now gone more than ninety minutes. But, I must admit, no one was squirming to get out. It was a very rich time for all of us, and one of the most meaningful sessions to date. The group was far more open than at any previous time, and thus, the extra time went by very quickly. Chapter 7 was assigned for the next week and we dismissed with prayer.

Week 11: April 18, 1990

The assignment was to read chapter 7. This chapter deals with the "Kairotic Existence." Yet another means of shifting our perceptual framework, the kairotic existence is summed up as a life in this world that is shaped by the will of God. The kairotic existence is empowered by God's presence. In this frame of reference, we live harmoniously with God, and instill harmony in the lives of others.

The bulk of our time was spent talking about such an existence. Most in the group found it difficult to genuinely remove themselves from the present world and its influence. It was agreed that this was not altogether necessary. The point is that Christians need to be open to God in order that they might allow God's influence to be the dominant factor in their lives. We no longer pick and choose the time and place in which we will serve the Lord. Our service is now a central part of our lives. The relationship with Christ is intimately close. We are no longer in control, the Lord is. Therefore, our existence, while here on earth places us into society as members of the family of God. It is God that shapes us, not this world.

The assignment for the week was to re-read chapter 7 slowly for the purpose of further digesting what the kairotic existence is all about. The group was also to meditate upon Ephesians 5:15-20 and write down any thoughts in their journals, that came from this passage, for the purpose of helping them better understand this remarkable way of life.

Week 12: April 25, 1990

As we assembled, the groups were divided into their smaller groups for the purpose of talking about the meaning of kairotic existence. They were also asked to identify any ways in which they believed we might all live such an existence.

Thirty minutes was given to this sharing. In this time, several pointed to the importance of being more careful in our daily walk. In other words,

being on guard against falling for the old nature, ways, and habits gives us opportunity to seek God's help even as temptations arise. Wisdom was also an important step. Wisdom comes from God, and because this is true, seeking God's direction consistently is vital to living such an existence. Another thought focused on the song God plants in our hearts. This magnificent means of expressing praise and adoration to God is not only uplifting to the individual from who's heart the music flows, but it is equally contagious to those living around us. And, finally, continual thanksgiving to God helps keep our lives in perspective. God is the giver of life. Thanksgiving reminds us of that.

I then introduced the next part of Shaped by the Word. An overview of chapters 8 and 9 was given as a means of preparing the group for the next phase of our study. Most in the group were developing a good understanding of a formational approach to God's Word. These chapters dealing with the functional-relational dynamics (what we do versus what God does in us while in loving relationship with our Creator), and being and doing (coming to grips with who we are), help us deepen our understanding of what it means to be a "word" from God.

Following the overview, the group was asked to read these chapters and keep notes in their journals especially as they deal with their own identity.

Week 13: May 2, 1990

After having read these chapters, the group was now even more aware of the need for God's influence upon their lives. Although our goal was always

to bring about a shift in the perceptual framework of each of us, it seemed to take this careful look at these chapters to solidify in our hearts such a need. Chapter 8 helped to paint a vivid picture of the way we function. Often, unknowingly, we tend to focus upon what we do as opposed to what God wants to do in us and through us. We determined that Scripture in spiritual formation would do little good if it were only used as another instrument or technique. Our personal loving relationship with God allows the Word to shape us.

Chapter 9 was also discussed at length. From our study we determined that our "being" is who we are. In other words, "being" reflects the condition of our souls, and the depth of our relationship with God. "Doing" is that which flows from our being. For example, when one is genuinely in love with God the things that person does reflect that love.

Relationship is the key word. When we try to function on our own we become insulated from the will of God. It is in openness to God that we are formed.

Because relationship is so significant, the group was asked to go home and spend time in prayer/reflection to determine, if possible, the kind of relationship they genuinely had with God. Again the group was asked to write any such reflections in their journals. Because this was such a private matter, the members were assured that no one would be asked to disclose any part of this. However, I did offer that should anyone feel the need to talk that they

could feel free to contact me. In addition the group was asked to read chapter 10.

Week 14: May 9, 1990

Chapter 10 deals with spiritual disciplines. Although the group had been practicing certain disciplines, this chapter would prove valuable in helping us place these disciplines into perspective. Spiritual disciplines help us break down barriers of self-control when offered to God as a means of God's grace working in us. Spiritual disciplines can be any number of things such as prayer, reading the Bible, keeping a journal, or reading good Christian literature. The key is that these things we do in order to grow in relationship with God and become conformed to the image of Christ become an offering to God day by day.

Through various assignments and experiences the group had been practicing spiritual disciplines. However, our time together was drawing quickly to an end. The real offerings to God were yet to be made. We now knew the importance of relationship to God. What would each of use be willing to offer God as a means of allowing that marvelous grace to penetrate us and form us? This was the assignment. We all agreed to write in our journals one or more spiritual disciplines, after much prayerful thought, that we would be willing to freely offer to God beyond our time together. As a reminder of the change that was taking place in us, the group was also asked to reflect on Ephesians 4:22-24 which talks about putting off the old nature and putting on the new.

Week 15: May 16, 1990

This would be the next to the last week our group would be meeting. We had agreed together to keep this time frame and were determined to stay with it.

The group had been asked to pray about and reflect on the spiritual disciplines they hoped to continue after our sessions ended. It was now obvious that the Bible could be approached in more than one way. Our goal was never to downgrade the importance of information. Information would always be vital. However, it would not be enough for any person desiring genuine openness to God and thus being shaped according to God's will. We had learned that spiritual formation in and of itself would only become an instrument of God's grace if it was first offered as a gift. We also learned the offerings made to God had to become a consistent part of living. One could not expect to grow if the Bible was picked up rarely and then at best blitzed for the sake of saying "I've done my deed."

Because we were nearing the end of our time together, most of this session was spent reflecting upon what we had covered and what we had learned. We had learned much about who we are in Christ. We learned about the nature of spiritual formation, the importance of being open to God, the difference between information and formation, and of the great need to change our perceptual frameworks. And, perhaps the most significant lesson was that of letting go of the controls and allowing God to show us the way. At the

close one final assignment was given. The group was to read chapter 12 which deals with obstacles in spiritual reading. It should be noted that the entire book was read over the course of time. Assignments were not given from all chapters specifically, but attention was given to the entire book during our time together. In re-reading chapter 12 the group was to wrestle with those things in their personal lives that hindered them the most, and work toward overcoming by surrendering them to God. We all agree that the temptation would be to let down after our last week. This measure was taken in order to try and prevent such an occurrence from happening.

Week 16: May 23, 1990

We could hardly believe that our allotted time had so quickly drawn to a close. In this, our final session, the majority of the time was spent in review. We spent about forty five minutes going over, in capsule form, what spiritual formation and formative reading in the Bible was all about. We concluded that spiritual formation and formative reading go hand in hand. Spiritual formation deals directly with our walk, or being conformed to the image of Christ. A formative approach to Scripture, or opening ourselves to the voice of God in the Word, is key to building relationship with the Lord. The knowledge we glean from the Word in this light edifies the reader, brings encouragement, correction, and help. No longer is our primary motive to master the text. The text has now become a vehicle through which God speaks and directs our walk.

Following this, the group was given an evaluation form which asked them to briefly describe their over-all feelings about our sixteen weeks together. The areas to be evaluated included, Shaped by the Word, the larger group experiences, the small group experiences, the assignments, journaling, my role as facilitator. Each question was given a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 being lowest). In addition, space was given for personal comments and suggestions following each area to be evaluated. At the end each participant was asked to write one paragraph describing his or her personal experience during the course of the project. A copy of this evaluation form may be seen in the Appendix along with their results.

After all had completed the evaluation we went into the sanctuary and closed our time together by giving thanks to God for this remarkable experience which had taught us so much about who we are in Christ Jesus. This proved to be a very moving time for us, and we parted with warm embraces.

CHAPTER 5

Results Of Key Questions

This chapter will answer three key questions. The questions were spelled out in the beginning of the project (questions 3-5), but could not be adequately answered until the participants had completed the project. The questions are as follows: 3) What principles are necessary to transform an individual or a group that reads the Scriptures for information into one that listens to the voice of God as they encounter the text? 4) How can persons overcome preconditions that cause them to master or control the text and become open to the Word that it might shape their lives? 5) What spiritual disciplines are necessary in maintaining a formational approach to Scripture?

Results

Question three focuses on the issue of those principles needed to transform persons who read the Scriptures informationally into persons who listen for the voice of God in the text. We discovered that a most significant principle for accomplishing this goal is in slowing down and taking time. One of the principal problems that most of us had to deal with was the overwhelming desire to rush through a passage in order to move on to another. More time in and of itself does not automatically project an individual into a formational mode. The significant issue is what the individual does during that time. What we discovered was that slowing down allowed for a greater opportunity to focus on God's voice. When the Scriptures are approached

unhurriedly and with openness, God's voice can be heard. As a result, assignments in the Scriptures were intentionally brief. It was not uncommon that passages were assigned to be read each day with specific instructions not to read any other during the week. This was done in order to slow us all down, giving us time to think about what we were reading, and giving God an opportunity to speak.

In an informational approach to the Scriptures, the goal is to learn as much as possible in as little time as possible. We learned that, although a significant number of facts may be accumulated with this approach, the tendency is to master the subject for sake of being in control. The formational approach is just the opposite. Here the goal is to listen to the voice of God. Our being in control is no longer important. This approach is much slower and requires time to think and meditate on the Word for the purpose of being formed. Listening for the voice of God takes time.

Another principle learned in our time together was expecting to hear God's voice. This can be aided by asking of ourselves certain key questions. The formational approach is a prayerful approach. Included in the time of prayer that prepares us to listen to God's voice must be the question; What is it you want me to hear in what I am about to read? The question is simple, yet profound. What it does is set a tone for expectation. We are now expecting to hear God's voice, and intentionally looking for clues as we encounter the

text. Asking this question opens our hearts and our spiritual ears to God's voice. In this mode we are looking for a Word to be spoken to us.

Other questions may well arise as a result of the first. For example, what are my feelings about what I am hearing God say? Or, how should I respond? One question may result in another as the text is encountered, but the initial question which causes us to look for a specific Word from God establishes the foundation upon which others are built.

Perhaps the most significant principle we learned was the importance of relinquishing the controls and accepting what God would say. Relinquishing the controls is often the most difficult. One of the significant characteristics of informational reading is that the text is an object that we feel the need to control or manipulate for our own purposes. Over the course of time most of us become so programmed for being in control that it is hard to let go. Wanting to be in control is certainly true in areas of our lives where uncertainty is involved. We humans like to be in charge. As long as this is the case, we can be comfortable with the Scriptures because we hear only what we want to hear. Letting go of the controls is another matter. No longer are we in charge. We are uncomfortable because we are not sure of what we will encounter. The evaluation revealed that of all the principles learned letting go was most significant and difficult (see appendix).

Letting go of the controls means surrendering self to God. It requires openness and honesty. It requires a willingness to accept what we hear from

God as best for our lives, even if it results in some changes of attitudes and actions. When we let go, God is able to be heard above the clamor of our opinions and ideas concerning the passages we are reading. The text is no longer something to be mastered or manipulated. It is now a vehicle in which the voice of God can be heard.

How we let go begins with the recognition that we are approaching the text with certain preconceived ideas about its' meaning. It also requires the recognition of certain attitudes that have been formed over a significant period of time. Once these things are recognized, one can begin to allow God to deal with our ideas and attitudes (some of which may be perfectly acceptable in God's sight). As we become more open to the voice of God, we are no longer as desirous of being in control. Rather, we become willing to listen to God's voice, and control is no longer so desirable because we recognize that God already has everything under control. And, the path upon which God will lead us will always be for our very best good.

Overcoming Preconditions

Question four deals with the related subject of overcoming preconditions that cause us to desire control versus becoming open to the Word for the purpose of being shaped. All of us live within the bounds of a perceptual framework. Perceptual frameworks are the things (such as habits, perspectives) that shape attitudes and actions alike. How we view Scripture is very definitely impacted by our framework. Often, because of education and

the perspectives of those around us, we become captives of these ideas and opinions. Thus, we cannot always get a fresh Word from God because we are convinced that we already understand what is before us.

As we worked together in this project, we discovered that overcoming these preconditions would not be easy. One means of overcoming the preconditions that shape us is repeated exposure to the Word. Reading and re-reading is often necessary. This involves constant listening to God, and refocusing our hearts and minds. We discovered that our perceptual frameworks often dictated our understanding of a passage. A casual reading of a passage would leave us with only that which we had previously understood. Repeated exposure (reading and re-reading) in combination with the intentional seeking to hear the voice of God, brings even a familiar passage into new light. Repeated exposure to the scriptures in the posture of seeking God's voice causes us to question any previous understanding of what a passage is saying. Even if our previous understanding is fairly accurate, we are able to see that our depth of understanding can be significantly improved.

We also learned that such repeated exposure was helpful in overcoming distractions. Most of us had to confess that our attention spans are relatively short. Perhaps it would be correct to say that this is in part directly related to our preconditioning. We tend to want what we want rather quickly. When we read the Scriptures and results do not come quickly, we tend to lose interest and our minds wander. Repeated exposure calls us back to what is before us

over and over. Thus, not only are distractions averted, but God is given a greater opportunity to speak the Word we need to hear.

Another valuable lesson in overcoming preconditions was discovered as we worked together. We discovered the value of sharing with one another out of our own experiences. We often discovered that we shared very similar ideas and attitudes. In listening to one another, we were able to open up to and to accept different perspective regarding the assigned passages. Often what one person could not see another would.

The sharing of ideas regarding what we believed to be the voice of God stretched us. Often our sharing opened up windows for one another that made it possible to move beyond any preconceived notions to a deeper understanding of the Word. It also brought to light, in some cases, that many of us had the same kind of preconditioning. An example of this was a certain attitude about the elder brother in the account of the Prodigal Son (see week 10). When asked with whom did they identify in the story, twenty three persons in our group said the elder brother. Most did so on the basis of his loyalty to his father and home. But, upon closer examination of the passage even those who identified with the elder brother had to agree his actions were not so pure. He offered no council to his younger brother concerning what life is like "out there." The elder brother made no attempt on his part to stop his brother from leaving. And, he was blinded to what he had at his disposal. Thus, he became angry when his father welcomed his lost son home in such a grand fashion.

Sharing together brought this to our attention, and we learned the importance of looking beyond our preconceptions. The elder brother shows us much more than loyalty.

An important lesson learned in regard to overcoming preconditions was that the surrender of self is critical. With the ideas and opinions most of us had already established over a long period of time, nothing short of surrender would pave the way for becoming open to God. Surrender meant for us a total handing over of all we are to God. Anything less would only be a hindrance.

Surrender also meant rediscovering who we are in Christ Jesus. We are the incarnation of Christ. We are called to carry on the very work he started. Our work on earth revolves around who we are and what we are called to be. As the incarnation of Christ, believers are called to be witnesses to the saving grace of Jesus in the world. Our light is to shine in the midst of darkness. Essential to this happening is our need to surrender self.

Ultimately we learned that there is no greater source for overcoming preconditioning than God. Our willingness to open ourselves to God is essential. When God is given the freedom to move and direct within our lives, our perceptual frameworks can be reshaped in those areas needed. As God is given this freedom our own freedom is experienced. We are no longer bound by wrong attitudes. We are no longer captives of weak understandings of the Word. Now God can work in us and through us to show us depth of understanding and a new mindset toward what it means to be conformed to

the image of Christ. The single most important source for transforming our perceptual frameworks is openness to God.

Spiritual Disciplines

Question five raises the issue of those spiritual disciplines necessary in maintaining a formational approach to Scripture. Let it be understood here that the spiritual disciplines are not an end in themselves. However, when these disciplines are utilized in the posture of genuinely seeking to hear the voice of God in our reading, they can become a means to that end.

Among the spiritual disciplines we utilized during the course of our time together was prayer. Prayer is communicating with God. Prayer is not a monologue whereby we do all the talking. Prayer is a mutual sharing between persons and God. Prayer should be as natural as breathing. Yet we discovered that most of us rarely found prayer so natural. Only through practice does prayer become an intimate part of life.

We learned that the more we prayed the more likely it was for us to do so on a consistent basis. We also learned that the more we prayed the more we were able to hear the voice of God as we read the Word. Prayer draws us into a loving relationship with God. Just as naturally as we might talk with a friend, in this means we talk and listen to God. But, the important thing to remember about this discipline is that it must be utilized even as we read the Scriptures. In this way the lines of communication are continually open. The mode in which we read has a tremendous effect upon the outcome. If our goal

is to hear the voice of God and understand what God desires to show us, then we must be in a continual attitude of prayer.

Prayer also provides us a means of sorting things out. Often as we read the Scriptures formationally we discover changes that need to be made in our lives. There are sometimes corrections that need to be made, which may result in repentance. There may also be the need to give thanks and glorify God. All this can be done in prayer. Therefore, prayer will always play a prominent role in maintaining a formational approach to Scripture.

Keeping a journal was another of the spiritual disciplines we experimented with during our time together. We discovered that while this discipline works for some, it is not for everyone. Those who liked it found that capturing thoughts and insights on paper helped them to reflect on what they had read. They further found it to be helpful as a measure for comparing progress in their spiritual journeys. Keeping a journal also provided a means for them to sort out various feelings and emotions that may have occurred while reading the Scriptures.

For the most part, those who did not like keeping a journal simply said they did not like to write. They found it easier to think things through without writing it down.

Writing in a journal was intentionally a private matter. The only things ever shared from a journal was strictly voluntary. If keeping a journal is to be

a part of maintaining a formational approach to Scripture, and it can be for many, privacy is essential.

Another discipline we practiced was the mutual sharing of the things God was showing us in our lives. Mutual sharing is a positive means of maintaining a formational approach. Sharing is a source of encouragement. Christians need to encourage one another. Mutual sharing is helpful in times of struggle as well as joy. We often find our questions to be the same. God can use us to speak the word someone else needs to hear. Mutual sharing lends a feeling of accomplishment as obstacles are overcome and growth is taking place. Such sharing is vital to keeping us in the Word. Together we can help one another as we strive to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Mutual sharing also helps us to understand we are not alone on this spiritual journey. Sharing with a friend or a small group lends support. We not only share progress or struggles, we also intercede for one another in prayer. We are strengthened by the presence of one another.

We also utilized the discipline of Lectio Divina (sacred reading) during our time together. This method of prayer involves four basic steps: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, and Contemplatio. Lectio seeks to open us to a vital union with God. The text is approached with an attitude of openness, and the desire to encounter God. Meditatio is serious reflection. Reflection is not merely an intellectual pursuit, it also involves the heart. The heart enables us to express love for God, and love motivates us to desire intimate contact with God. In the

meditative stance one listens, and listening reminds us that receptivity is at the heart of spiritual formation. *Oratio* is our response to God. It is our response from the heart. By accepting the truth one sees the real worth of God's Word, and is drawn nearer to God. By rejecting this truth one sees no real value in what is revealed. *Contemplatio* allows God to act in whatever manner God chooses. When a union of love is created with God, we desire to be what God wants us to be.

Going through the steps of *Lectio Divina* is an excellent discipline because it frees us from the restrictions of self-centeredness, and helps us to recognize our dependency upon God. One seeks an encounter with God from the beginning while using this method of prayer. By doing so the focus is formational from the start.

Any number of disciplines may well apply to the maintaining of a formational approach. Worship, the reading of devotional literature, study, and others can all play an important role in accomplishing this goal. There is often a great deal of over-lap between the disciplines. In other words, one discipline enhances another. Prayer, for example, not only helps us maintain a formational approach, it also brings fulfillment in worship which also helps maintain a formational approach. Worship gives us a perspective as to who God is, and thus, our desire to grow closer to God and hear that still small voice is greatly increased.

During the course of our time together in the project, prayer, keeping a journal, and mutual sharing were among the main disciplines we employed. We did experiment with other disciplines, but would conclude that of all the disciplines we worked with, prayer and mutual sharing were most effective.

CHAPTER 6

This chapter will be devoted to a summation and evaluation of this project/dissertation. The hope is that this evaluation will contribute to any future study in the field of formative reading of God's Word.

Review

The project/dissertation has been a most rewarding experience. The sixteen week period spent with the Bible study group, and the year spent with the Congregational Reflection Group prior to this represents a period in life I shall never forget. I want to begin this evaluation by giving special thanks to all those who so faithfully made this project such a blessing.

This project began for personal reasons. As a pastor I truly desired that my time spent reading God's Word would become a vehicle in which God could genuinely speak to me. Much of my time was devoted to Bible study, but little of it was devoted to hearing the voice of God. In addition, I suspected that many among the laity of the church were experiencing the same kind of problem. Seeking information rather than formation was a problem that all of us had to deal with. In no way does this suggest that information has no place. It does. But, without the critical balance that formative reading brings, Bible reading may have little affect upon our understanding of who we are in Christ Jesus.

Research

One of the major components needed to complete the project was research. My approach to this was somewhat backwards. Although some research in reading theory, Jesus' use of Scripture, and early formational approaches had begun before the project started, the majority of this work was not completed until after the project was finished. The positive side of this rests in the fact that we all learned together the nature and purpose of formational reading. As facilitator, I had looked deeply enough to determine that this project was of great worth. I had also completed enough of the research to give me a sense of direction. But, in retrospect, to have done the research much more thoroughly before the group ever met would have contributed a number of additional opportunities to try other spiritual disciplines.

As for the research itself, this portion of the project/dissertation was most insightful. The research was challenging at times because my grasp of the original languages is very weak. Many of the points being made would have well been served had I had a better grasp of the Greek language. All in all, this phase of the project was a tremendous learning experience.

The research opened a whole new approach to the Scriptures for me. It revealed the importance of listening to God. It focused my own identity as a word spoken forth by God. The research sharpened my understanding of the differences between informational and formational approaches to the

Scriptures. It further opened a door that led to the discovery of spiritual disciplines needed to focus on the formational approach. These include centering (taking the time to clear the mind and heart so that an appropriate posture may be achieved to be open to God), not quitting when distracted but returning to the Word over and over until it becomes the primary focus, focusing on the Word in an iconographic manner (a verbal window), and journaling (keeping track of my spiritual journey by recording those things God reveals as I listen).

The research also opened many new insights into the way Jesus lived by the Word. In large part, the Word became for him a well-spring of guidance for his life and ministry. The Scriptures were so much a part of his life that when tempted, for example, Jesus could draw strength and courage from the Word so firmly planted in his heart that he would not yield to any temptation even though he was weak and tired.

Overall, it was hoped that the participants would be able to understand and utilize what was learned in the research to help them to be open to the voice of God in the Word. Openness was accomplished in many ways. Most in the group were able to deal much better with distractions and become focused on hearing the voice of God. Not all benefitted in the same degree from their use of the spiritual disciplines, but everyone was open to trying them. Everyone in the group did learn to distinguish between information and formation. This resulted in a conscious effort to allow more time for listening

and has continued to help most of the participants in being much more open and receptive to God.

One other point must be mentioned here. The research which I shared concerning Jesus' use of Scripture has had the single most important impact upon the group and on me. His great love for the Word gave a continual source of strength to draw from throughout his life and ministry. His handling of temptations, teaching with his disciples, dealing with the Pharisees, and dying on the cross, were all impacted by his love of the Word. We who shared in this experience want to be like Jesus, and even more so because his example means far more now than before.

The Project

Many things worked well during the project. The Bible study group makes up a major portion of the core in the church, that is, the most faithful in attendance at all events and in getting things done. Additionally, they demonstrate the most evidence of spiritual growth by their open desire to draw closer to God. Their faithfulness and desire to see this project accomplish the goals and objectives we established was most beneficial. In addition to this, the group worked well together. A cooperative spirit was evident among them, and the group genuinely made every effort to allow all of us to be open with one another. Yet, it should be noted that being open to one another did not come easy to everyone in the group. At least six of the twenty-five in the group verbally expressed some difficulty in talking in front of the entire group.

This did become easier, in large part, because the reluctant ones saw us all sharing similar needs and thoughts. Throughout the time there was very little absenteeism (week 3 one person missed, week 7 two persons missed, week 9 one person missed, week 12 one person missed, week 14 one person missed). The group was attentive and responsive. They took seriously the work before them, and accepted and did the assignments without complaint. We all shared the common desire to become open to God through the Word. The overall attitude of the group was very positive and open to making the most of our time together.

The group process was chosen primarily because I desired to work with real people during the project. While a well developed workbook may be helpful, I wanted to observe to see if any changes were taking place among the participants. Also I believed that we could, and did, learn from one another. Fellowship is an important part of this process of being formed. Knowing that others are experiencing the same struggles and joys is a blessing. We are not alone, and while ultimately our goal was to become open to God we were able to help each other by being there for one another.

An evaluation was given to each of the participants at the close of the last session. This evaluation allowed the participants to rate the usefulness of the resources, group experiences, journaling, assignments, and my role as facilitator. Additionally, the evaluation allowed the participants to express what

they felt they had learned from the experience, and to offer any suggestions for improvement.

The evaluation was compiled near the end of our time together. Looking back, I realize now that if I were to do the project over, the evaluation would have better served this work had it been developed before the sessions began. In no way was the evaluation designed to gain results complimentary to the goals of the project. However, as a tool it does offer insights into the learning experiences of the participants. The evaluation indicated that formation can take place and persons can draw nearer to God. Please see the Appendix for the evaluation form and the results.

The small group experiences by far were most productive when it came to persons openly sharing what God was speaking to them. In this setting a genuine bond was formed and people became comfortable with being vulnerable. These experiences were unique in that for at least one third of the group this was the first time these persons felt free to express their deepest feelings concerning their relationship with God. A number of these persons expressed to me that it felt good to be able to know that they were not alone in their struggles and joys.

Additionally, the small group setting allowed the people to build relationships with God and one another. This does not suggest that relationships were absent within the larger group setting, but it was far more noticeable when the small groups were together. Each time these groups met

the same people were together. As time went on the building of relationships became more obvious as persons who prior to this experience spent little time together were now standing around after the meetings and continuing to talk. As to their relationships with God, more and more persons were anxious to delve into the Word and there was considerably more sharing outside our allotted time together concerning that which God was showing them.

The key to this openness can be attributed to the work we were doing in formational reading. As participants read and pondered the Word and opened themselves to the voice of God, an inner transformation was taking place. They had more confidence as to their own identity as a "word spoken forth" from God. They were seeing themselves in a new light. They were no longer merely gathering information, but being formed. As a result, sharing with one another became a much more natural experience.

One additional note can be added. At the time of this writing, which is nearly two years later, the evidence of these relationships continues to exhibit itself in much the same way as previously described. Most who participated continue to express themselves in our continuing Bible study with the same degree of openness as was shared during the project. Also one of the small groups continues to meet weekly for Bible study and prayer. It may never be known the full impact of the project upon the participants lives or those they will influence, but I am thankful for the experience and find that being open to God is most gratifying.

Resources

Another area to be considered in this evaluation is the text, Shaped by the Word by Mulholland. This book not only proved invaluable during the course of our time, but has since become a reference used from time to time as the Bible study continues. This book was most helpful in bringing the reality of ingrained approaches to life clearly into focus. As a result, we were able to work through many of those things which were hindering us all from allowing God to speak to us through the Bible. The book also helped to define who we are in Christ. Knowing that we are a word spoken forth by God not only helps shape our identity, but it also gives us a much deeper desire to listen for the voice of God when we open the Word.

The weakness of the book was that many in the group had some initial problems with the vocabulary. Even though the terms were very well defined, many in the group would see a word such as "kairotic" and surrender to the fact that this was way over their heads before giving the chapter a chance to explain what it meant. As a result, a good deal of time was devoted to defining and explaining terms and phrases. This was not all together bad because once this was accomplished the group could begin to grasp the word God was speaking to them within that particular context.

Over-all the book was widely accepted by the group. I believe the more acquainted they became with the whole idea of spiritual formation and

formative reading, the easier it was for the group to understand and grasp the vocabulary of the book.

Journaling

Another experience that needs some consideration is the journaling process. For most in the group this was something new. Although not unheard of, no one in the group, with the exception of those in the CRG, had done anything like this before. Most in the group appreciated the experience, but only three have continued the discipline with any regularity. This appears to be so for two reasons. The first is that most felt that timing was a problem. Many in the group were and are having their devotional time first thing in the morning. As a result, most of their time spent in reflection is done while on the way to work or in settings not conducive to writing. The other reason was simply that many felt they were not getting that much out of the writing. They felt better about thinking about what they read as opposed to writing it down. Interestingly enough, most have indicated that from time to time they do enjoy reading their journals and occasionally making entries.

The assignments also played an important role in this project. The overall response to them was very positive. The group took these assignments seriously and genuinely strove to make the experiences count.

As our time progressed and the group felt more comfortable with what we were doing, some suggested that it would clearly take more time than a week to allow God to show all that was meant for us to see. This became one

of the frustrating matters that was dealt with. The whole idea was for us to slow down and give God a chance to speak, and yet there was a great deal of ground to cover and only sixteen weeks to do it. If I could do this project over, I would begin it with no specific ending date. To do so would be risky because very few people would be willing to participate in something that has an uncertain ending.

Facilitation

Perhaps one of the more difficult aspects of this evaluation is my own work as facilitator. The evaluation completed by the members of the group were all highly complementary. The members all felt that the experience of working so closely together was rewarding and genuine relationships were built that will always be remembered. They also commented that things were well organized, and that I had offered them an experience that was truly helpful in building a close relationship with God.

The truth is that the group wanted me to accomplish the goal of completing the project. That was extremely helpful and encouraging to me. I can never thank them enough for their contribution to this project/dissertation.

From my perspective the job I did was respectable, but I continually wrestled with my usual take charge manner. As facilitator my job was to help the group find the way of hearing the voice of God through the Bible. Often I found myself telling them what God was saying rather than allowing God to say what needed to be heard. As time passed this diminished, but my

wrestling with this issue allowed God to teach me to become a better listener as well.

I truly enjoyed leading this group through the project. I may well have been the greatest beneficiary simply because I was exposed to the insights of twenty five dedicated loving Christians.

If I had the project to do all over again, I would elect to work with a much smaller group. My primary reason for this is the fact that with so many it simply does not allow enough time for any extensive personalized sharing. This was happening in the smaller groups, but not very often with me. Ideally a group no larger than eight would be much more conducive to allowing for the personalized attention needed in this setting. I found it impossible for me to adequately focus on five small groups given the short time span in which we were working. This change could be made easily and would be highly recommended to any one doing further work of this kind in the future.

The project has taught many things to me. As a pastor it is so easy to fall into a pattern of doing Bible study for the sake of gaining information to the exclusion of hearing the voice of God. Many Christians are prone to fall into this trap because of ingrained perceptual frameworks which tend to create a take charge attitude. The Bible is one of God's primary instruments in which Christians can hear the voice of God. Yet, when approached primarily from an informational point of view, God is given little opportunity to speak. From a formational perspective Christians become open to the voice of God in the

Word because now the desire of the heart is to seek the voice. The desire is also to be conformed to the image of Christ. Thus, in this kind of approach to the Bible an atmosphere is created that encourages listening on our part. It is only through listening that we shall hear the voice of God.

APPENDIX

Survey

I spend time along in the Bible:

- _____ Daily
- _____ Most Days
- _____ Occasionally
- _____ Rarely

If your answer was occasionally or rarely is it because:

- _____ I find it dull
- _____ I have difficulty understanding
- _____ The lack of time
- _____ Other
(Please write a brief statement)

Results of the Survey

Based on 110 Participants

I spend time along in the Bible:

<u>11 persons/ 10%</u>	Daily
<u>18 persons/ 16%</u>	Most Days
<u>75 persons/ 68%</u>	Occasionally
<u>6 persons/ 6%</u>	Rarely

Evaluation

Using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being lowest), how would you access the following? Please circle.

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | The resource book: <u>Shaped by the Word</u> . | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | The larger group experiences. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | The small group experiences. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | The assignments. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | Journaling. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | Ed's role as facilitator. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | Please write a brief description of your over-all feelings concerning our sixteen weeks together. Please use the back of this sheet or a separate sheet if needed. | | | | | |
| 8. | Please describe those things you found most helpful during this study. | | | | | |
| 9. | What was most difficult? | | | | | |
| 10. | Please offer any additional thoughts regarding how this project may be improved and any additional comments you would like to make. | | | | | |

Thank you for all your help.

Results of the Evaluation

Based on 25 Participants

1. The resource book: Shaped by the Word.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 16 9
2. The larger group experiences.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 2 18 5
3. The small group experiences.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 2 6 17
4. The assignments.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 14 11
5. Journaling.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 1 18 3 3
6. Ed's role as facilitator.
Possible Score: 1 2 3 4 5
Results: 4 21
7. Please write a brief description of your over-all feelings concerning our sixteen weeks together.

Results: (A listing of descriptive words and phrases).

3 of the 25 persons described the experience as rewarding.

10 of the 25 persons called it exciting.

15 of the 25 persons called it a great learning experience.

14 of the 25 persons specifically called it an encounter with God.

25 of the 25 persons indicated it was a time in which they grew closer to God and one another.

4 of the 25 persons indicated some degree of difficulty in getting started, but ended the time blessed.

8. Please describe those things you found most helpful during this study.
Results:

23 of the 25 persons indicated in one way or another that learning to let go and become open to God was the most helpful lesson learned during the study.

15 of the 25 persons indicated that being together and sharing together was also very significant.

1 of the 25 persons indicated that my leadership was most helpful.

1 of the 25 persons indicated that the resource book, Shaped by the Word was most helpful.

9. What was most difficult?

Results:

8 of the 25 persons indicated the letting go of the controls was the most difficult to do. It should be noted that these same persons also indicated in number 8 that learning to let go was also the most helpful lesson learned.

9 of the 25 persons indicated they had been uncomfortable sharing in the larger group, but learned to open up in the smaller group setting.

4 of the 25 persons indicated difficulty with completing the assignments.

2 of the 25 persons indicated that they had difficulty keeping a journal, but did so for the experience.

1 of the 25 persons did not respond to this question.

10. Please offer any additional thoughts regarding how this project may be improved and any additional comments you would like to make.

Results:

Only 5 persons wrote anything in response to number 10. All these responses were complementary to the effect of wishing me well in my continued studies.

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